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# Beyond the Democratic State: Anti-Authoritarian Interventions in Democratic Theory

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**BEYOND THE DEMOCRATIC STATE:**  
***ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN INTERVENTIONS IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY***

by

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Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Bernhardt, Brian Carl (Ph.D., Political Science)

Beyond the Democratic State: *Anti-Authoritarian Interventions in Democratic Theory*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Steven Vanderheiden

Though democracy has achieved widespread global popularity, its meaning has become increasingly vacuous and citizen confidence in democratic governments continues to erode. I respond to this tension by articulating a vision of democracy inspired by anti-authoritarian theory and social movement practice. By anti-authoritarian, I mean a commitment to individual liberty, a skepticism toward centralized power, and a belief in the capacity of self-organization. This dissertation fosters a conversation between an anti-authoritarian perspective and democratic theory: What would an account of democracy that begins from these three commitments look like? In the first two chapters, I develop an anti-authoritarian account of freedom and power. In Chapter I, mobilizing insights from libertarians and republicans, I offer an account of freedom that is divorced from self-sovereignty and committed to non-domination. In Chapter II, utilizing work in anarchist anthropology, I show why freedom as non-domination is incompatible with the state, and that an alternative to the statist organization of power is possible. While a centripetal logic unifies society's power in a Leviathan, a centrifugal logic disperses power across many non-sovereign nodes. In the second half of the dissertation, in order to elaborate what centrifugal power may look like in our contemporary context, I focus on two core anti-authoritarian social movement practices: direct action and networked organization. In Chapter III, I argue that direct action, a practice that enacts collective power, is democratic to the extent that it upsets power inequalities and domination, and creates spaces for others to exercise political power. In Chapter IV, I argue that networks enable two ends that are often thought to be in tension: coordination, and self-governance, on the one hand, and diversity and pluralism, on the other. In contrast to representative elections and directly democratic assemblies, however, networks do not require a well-defined people, a centralized decision-making body, or even a single, unifying decision. Throughout the dissertation, I argue against the platitude of the "democratic state" in favor of a democracy against the state. I conclude by re-imagining democracy as the dispersion of power.

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## INTRODUCTION

### DEMOCRACY AGAINST DEMOCRACY

*“‘Democracy’ was once a word of the people, a critical word, a revolutionary word. It has been stolen by those who would rule over the people, to add legitimacy to their rule. It is time to take it back, to restore it to its critical and radical power.”*

- C. Douglas Lummis (1996, 15)

*“Nuestros sueños no caben en sus urnas”*  
(*“Our dreams do not fit in their ballot boxes.”*)

- Slogan from Argentina’s 2001 rebellion

#### I. Ambivalence and Ambiguity

We are deeply ambivalent about democracy today. On the one hand, democracy has never enjoyed such great global popularity. There are more democratic governments in existence today than at any previous historical moment. Moreover, the democratic ideal has been an important source of inspiration for the wave of rebellions known as the Arab Spring that began in late 2010 in Tunisia and spread across much of North Africa and the Middle East the following year. Indeed, the Arab world – often thought to be among the least hospitable places in the world for democracy – has recently been a hotbed of democratic activity. This wave of protests and occupations then moved beyond the Arab world and swept across Europe and, finally, the United States throughout 2011: the Arab Spring became the American Fall.

While the motivations for the occupations varied – from opposition to long-standing dictatorial regimes in North Africa, to economic austerity in Greece, Spain and the United Kingdom, to a growing concentration of economic and political power in the United States – it is noteworthy that the form of resistance employed in each place bore striking similarities. From Cairo to Barcelona to New York and Oakland, protesters sought to occupy public spaces and hold them for an extended period of time. The tactical strengths of such a strategy were clear: maintaining a visible and accessible space provided an easy way for large numbers of people to

engage with the protest and, simultaneously, allowed momentum to build through escalating tension with police and city officials. It is no surprise then that this tactical innovation, which garnered so much attention in Tahrir Square, was duplicated in cities across Europe and the U.S. Beyond its tactical strengths, though, the public occupations provided a highly visible testing ground for alternative models of democracy and modes of citizen action. Underlying both the *Indignados* movement in Spain and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, was an effort to radicalize and reinvigorate democratic practice. There was, as the Spanish put it, a call for *¡Democracia Real YA!*: Real Democracy NOW!. Campaign slogans aside, the actual practice of decision-making in many occupations – characterized by such mechanisms as the “general assembly” and “the people’s mic” – illustrate this radically democratic impulse, which used the occupations as a site to experiment with direct and participatory forms of democracy. In short, democracy has been and continues to be an incredibly inspiring ideal.

On the other hand, though, there are very real, and quite stark, concerns about the reality of actually-existing democratic governments. In Egypt, for example, while 66% of people agree that “democracy is preferable to any other form of government,” 56% percent are “dissatisfied” with the way democracy is working in their country (“Egyptians Increasingly Glum” 2013). More striking, I think, are the perspectives of citizens in the so-called “consolidated democracies” – that is, democracies that are thought to be highly functioning and stable. Consider the United States. Fully 80% of Americans says they “trust the government in Washington” “some of the time” or “never.” In contrast, only 19% of Americans say the trust the government “just about always” or “most of the time” (“Public Trust in Government: 1958-2013” 2013). Similarly, 69% of Americans say that “government is run for the benefit of a few big interests,” whereas only 29% say that “government is run for the benefit of all” (“The ANES

Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior” 2008a). Finally, 60% of Americans agree with the statement “public officials don’t care what people like me think,” while only 23% disagree with that statement (“The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior” 2008b). These numbers should be very troubling. Citizens are highly skeptical of our democratic government. Indeed, in this era of partisanship, the fact that we have serious doubts about our democracy and little say over our government seems to be one of the few things that a large majority of Americans agree about.

As an activist, I have witnessed and experienced this ambivalence first-hand. My first experiences with protests and social movements came during the early 2000s as part of the alter-globalization movement in the Washington, D.C. area. The international institutions whose summits we protested – the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the G8 among others – were not only propagating poverty and privatization, but were fundamentally anti-democratic. I still have a shirt I made for an anti-IMF/World Bank protest that reads, simply “Globalize Democracy.” If the primary ills of neoliberal economic globalization could be traced to its unelected, unaccountable, and unrepresentative institutions, then the solution was to democratize them. And, yet, at the same time, it was the police and politicians in supposedly highly-functioning democratic governments that suppressed these movements through the use of force.

More recently, when citizens have challenged growing economic inequality and the corporate domination of government, as they have in aforementioned *Indignados* and Occupy Wall Street movements, democratic governments have again demonstrated their willingness to use a variety of repressive tactics to uproot any protests that go beyond state-sanctioned sign-holding. In Denver, I and many others watched, helplessly, as hundreds of storm-trooperesque



police invaded and destroyed the local Occupy encampment during the dead of night. By the next morning, this space, which had fostered an ongoing experiment in participatory democracy, had been cleared with little evidence of what had been remaining. Our experiment in democracy was crushed by our democratic government. Especially when understood from a historical perspective as the continuation of a long-standing practice of democratic governments repressing democratic social movements, one begins to wonder: “If this is democracy, then why exactly are we fighting for ‘more’ of this?” The simple answer is that we are not.

The manifold social movements that have emerged over the past decade or do not want *more* democracy, they want *different* democracy. When we chant in the streets “This is what democracy looks like!” we are proposing not more of the same, but rather new ways of conceiving and practicing democracy. Indeed, many contemporary social movements – in Argentina, Greece, Mexico, Spain, and the United States – mobilize democratic ideals and practices against democratic states. Indeed, the primary normative basis for these popular critiques of democratic governments is the democratic ideal itself: the notion that people should have the power to shape their own lives and to participate in decisions that affect them. To put this more bluntly, they – we – use democracy as a weapon *against* democracy. We pit democracy against the democratic state. It is this ambivalence about democracy – that we both love it and hate it – that motivates this project. How might we rethink, reimagine, and reinvigorate democracy so that the reality more closely matches the ideal?

This question, however, is made more difficult by the ambiguity of the concept of democracy itself. As I have suggested, democracy, broadly understood, has never before attained the global supremacy that it enjoys today. And yet, at the same time, the usage of the term democracy has perhaps never been so vacuous, so bereft of meaning. In Brown’s (2010)

articulation, “Democracy has historically unparalleled global popularity yet has never been more conceptually footloose or substantively hollow.” People who have fundamental disagreements about politics, nonetheless, seem to share a commitment to democracy, though they clearly have distinct understandings of the concept. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq was launched in the name of democracy, at the same time that millions of people around the world protested the war in the name of democracy. In this sense, democracy has become an “empty signifier” (Brown 2010), a common term that masks fundamentally different views of its meaning and, as such, that glosses over radically divergent visions of democracy. Though both former President George W. Bush and anti-war demonstrators used the term ‘democracy,’ they did not mean the same thing by it. The political consequence of this is that democracy has become, at best, an unhelpful term with little substantive meaning, divorced from its radical and transformative potential; at worst, democracy has developed into a way of legitimating (and diffusing resistance to) war abroad, repression at home and neoliberal austerity everywhere. As such, the project of reinvigorating democracy must be both critical and visionary. It must explain the ambiguity of the term democracy – an ambiguity that justifiably generates doubt about the democratic project as such. In the following section, I explain the nature of this ambiguity by outlining several competing conceptualizations of democracy. In doing so, it becomes possible to distinguish precisely the kinds of democracy that contemporary social movements and their defenders should want more (and less) of.

## **II. The Multiple Meanings of Democracy**

At least part of the reason that “we are all democrats now,” as Brown puts it, is that democracy means many different (often incompatible) things to different people. I will not attempt an exhaustive summary of these differences, but I do want to outline several distinct

ways of conceptualizing democracy that help situate the argument I make in the remainder of the dissertation: 1) Institutional Democracy, which sees democracy as a specific kind of governmental regime; 2) Justificatory Democracy, which sees democracy as a method of legitimating rules and rulers; and 3) Radical Democracy, which sees democracy as an ideal that is in tension with the state and other forms of concentrated power. After articulating the basic weaknesses of institutional and justificatory invocations of democracy, I elaborate what I take to be radical democracy's core commitments and argue for the merits of this approach to democracy.

### *Institutional Democracy: Democracy as a Governmental Regime*

First, democracy is conceptualized as a type of governmental regime. In this conceptualization, democracy is defined a set of institutional arrangements, usually including some combination of: competitive elections, universal suffrage, guarantees of basic civil liberties, constraints on executive power, and peaceful transfers of power (Dahl 1971; Przeworski et al. 2000; Munck and Verkuilen 2002). Such a perspective can be traced to Schumpeter's (1948, 269) definition of democracy as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." This is the dominant way of understanding democracy within empirical political science and is a useful way of conceptualizing and distinguishing existing political systems around the world. The widely used Polity IV data-set, for example, enables users to a) make meaningful interstate comparisons, identifying the level of democracy or authoritarianism in governments around the world, and b) make meaningful intrastate comparisons, identifying the level of democracy or authoritarianism in a single government over time (Marshall and Jaggers 2010).

While there is real value in being able to measure governmental regime type on the basis of institutional arrangements, as a way of defining democracy it is deeply problematic and leads to serious normative difficulties. At times, this approach seems to follow the logic of: “We know that the U.S. and Western Europe is democratic, so let’s identify the basic traits of these systems of government and then look around the world for governments that share those characteristics. We can then identify how democratic any government is in relation to our ideal types.” And, indeed, according to this conceptualization of democracy some actually-existing governments, including the United States, are “fully democratic” (a 10 out of 10) and have been since 1945, when the data begins (Marshall and Jaggers 2010). This is problematic for two reasons. First, there is no variation over time despite major social, economic and political changes that have had real effects on the quality of democracy in this country, including the Cold War and the Red Scare, the Civil Rights Movement, the Watergate Scandal, and more recently, the Patriot Act and the War on Terror. Second, the implicit assumption is viewing the U.S. as a “fully democratic” country is that the democracy in the U.S. is as good, rich, or developed as it could possibly be. To hold that the meaning of democracy is fully actualized in the governmental regime ruling the United States today is both theoretically absurd – consider, for example, that most people spend the majority of the waking hours of their adult lives in workplaces that much more closely resemble authoritarian governments than democratic ones – and, moreover, is unable to account for widely-held concerns (briefly discussed earlier) about the representativeness and accountability of our governmental institutions.

In addition, an influential framework within the empirical study of democratization argues convincingly that the transition to democratic regimes occurs when elites concede to competitive elections as way of co-opting political opposition and avoiding more revolutionary

changes in their society's power structure (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003). This makes for a quite compelling framework for analyzing transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic ones. However, in doing so, it suggests that democratic regimes (i.e. regimes with competitive elections and other institutional features discussed above) are *not* actually the embodiment of "rule by the people," but rather an effective way for elites to maintain political and economic power in spite of democratizing and redistributive demands. For all these reasons, I conclude that democracy cannot and should not be reduced to set of governmental institutions.

*Justificatory Democracy: Democracy as a Method for Legitimizing Rules and Rulers*

Second, democracy is invoked as a way of legitimating rules and rulers. According to this conceptualization, democracy provides a justification for some to rule over others through the use of either aggregative procedures such as proportional or majoritarian elections, or deliberative procedures designed to produce consensus. Differences between aggregative and deliberative democrats notwithstanding (Young 2002), thinking about democracy as a way of legitimating rulers is dominant within much of democratic political theory. An important task of these theories is to solve the "legitimation problem." Such theories ask, 'How can a rule or ruler – each with coercive implications for citizens – be legitimated through democratic procedures?' Habermas (1996) has famously tried to solve the legitimation problem in contemporary democracies by theorizing how citizens might discursively participate in the polity, even though politics is too complex and citizens too diverse to "rule" in the more traditional sense. "The *democratic process* bears the entire burden of legitimation" (Habermas 1996, 450). However, insofar as we understand democracy to mean "rule by the people," democracy is not best conceptualized primarily as a way of legitimating the rule of some over others. Consider Lummis' quote in the epigraph: "'Democracy' was once a word of the people, a critical word, a

revolutionary word. It has been stolen by those who would rule over the people, to add legitimacy to their rule. While there may well be forms of representation or delegation that are compatible with democracy, to reduce democracy to a justification for some to rule over others is to abandon the notion that “the people” might actually “rule” themselves. Though elections may be democratic, they are not the same as democracy. Many of the Egyptian revolutionaries, who I think were clearly motivated by the democratic ideal, opposed early elections in their country because they knew they would be manipulated by the main powerhouses in the country: the Army and the Muslim Brotherhood (and they were right). I – and, based on the survey data noted above, I suspect many of my fellow citizens, too – have wondered if a similar dynamic is in play in the U.S. context: elections are controlled by powerful elites. Wolin (2008, 47), for example, has argued that the U.S. should be regarded not as a “full” or “consolidated” democracy, but rather as a “‘managed democracy,’ a political form in which governments are legitimated by elections they have learned to control.” Fundamentally, I reject justificatory invocation of democracy, because democracy’s function is not to legitimate rulers, but to enable self-rule. Democracy’s task is not to authorize some to govern others, but to authorize all of us to govern ourselves.

#### *Radical Democracy: Democracy as an Ideal*

Third, democracy is conceptualized as a radical ideal. I mean radical in two distinct, but related, senses: 1) going to the root meaning of a concept, and 2) as advocating fundamental change. In the first place, to advocate for radical democracy entails an effort to recover and reaffirm the root meaning of the word. Democracy is the conjoining of *demos* (people) with *kratia* (power or rule).

Standard definitions slip away from this primary idea. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that democracy means “government by the people”...The

trouble starts...when 'power' is replaced by 'government.' If 'government' means governance – the process of governing – then it means about the same as power, and there is no difficulty. But if it means 'a government' – the political institutions existing in a society – then we have to an entirely different category of proposition...What we have now is no longer a definition but a hypothesis. The hypothesis is that the way to get power to the people is to put them in charge of 'the government,' that is, the state apparatus (Lummis 1996, 23).

Hence, democracy, at its core, means rule by the people, or a condition in which people have power – *nothing more, nothing less*. As Lummis (*ibid.* 22) puts it:

[D]emocracy is not the name of any particular arrangement of political or economic institutions. Rather, it is a situation that political or economic institutions may or may not help to bring about. It describes an ideal, not a method for achieving it. It is not a kind of government, but an end of government; not a historically existing institution, but historical project.

At its core, then, democracy is about people having political power. More than that, it is premised on the notion of political equality, that people have roughly equal power to shape common affairs. And, to say that people share power, or share in ruling themselves is, to use Arendt's language in describing the ancient Athenian polis, fundamentally a situation in which there is, in fact, "no-rule, without a division between rulers and ruled" (Arendt 1963, 20). Rather than being ruled, democracy entails people ruling themselves. Rather than authorizing someone else's power, democracy occurs when people mobilize their own power. Rather than being governed, democracy is about governing ourselves. Democracy as a radical ideal, therefore, is about self-governance, and entails a vision of a truly free and egalitarian political order to be perpetually strived for, if never fully achieved.

I do not just mean radical in the etymological sense, however, but also in the political sense. Here, radical is juxtaposed to reform. While the reformist wishes to change certain policies or tinker around the edges, the radical wishes to change the basic structure of society – its basic organization of power and patterns of ownership. Hence, the "radical" in radical

democracy means not only holding tight to democracy's root meaning, but also viewing it as something that is politically radically, in the sense of being subversive of, and seeking to transform, all society's basic power structure. Indeed, the former implies the latter. If democracy means a situation in which people have power, then democracy is subversive of any situation in which power is concentrated away from people rather than dispersed among them. "[R]adical democracy is subversive everywhere. It is subversive not only in military dictatorships but also in countries that are called democratic...It is subversive not only inside big corporations but also inside big unions" (Lummis 1996, 25). Perhaps the most concentrated form of power in the world is the modern state. Following Weber, I define the state as the entity in society (or a territory) that possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. It is safe to say that such an entity – all the more so given modern technologies of surveillance and violence – possesses enormous coercive power. From my perspective, then, I see radical democracy as, at a minimum, in tension with the state and, perhaps, as essentially incompatible with the state. It is worth pausing for a moment to appreciate how divergent this conceptualization of democracy is from the prior two. Whereas the institutional approach *defines* democracy as a set of state institutions and justificatory approach views democracy as a way of *legitimizing* state institutions, the radical approach sees the democratic state as, in a sense, an oxymoron. Radical democracy is something that occurs outside of, and often in opposition to, the democratic state.

### **III. Social Movements and Radical Democracy**

If radical democracy occurs outside of the state, then not surprisingly, we ought to look to non-state actors for examples of, and experiments in, democratic praxis. In particular, we should look toward social movements. But, what is a social movement? McAdam (1982, 25), a key



social movement theorist and developer of the influential “political process model,” defines social movements as “organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to noninstitutional forms of political participation.”

While I think this definition is mostly right, I see two problems with it. First, I am not convinced that social movements, by definition, must involve actions by “excluded groups.” Given that McAdam’s focus was on the development of the black insurgency and the civil rights movements, it makes sense that he would see social movements being a political practice of excluded groups; surely, African-Americans meet this criterion. However, what of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) during their heyday? They clearly meet every other element of McAdam’s definition of a social movement, and yet I hesitate to call them an excluded group. I am not convinced that simply because they act on behalf of the dominant racial group in America that they ought not be considered a social movement. Or, considering a more contemporary and mainstream example, is the Tea Party (at least in its early days) a social movement? Again, the Tea Party clearly seems to be an “organized effort...to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve[s] recourse to noninstitutional forms of political participation.” However, many Tea Party actors do not seem to be from “excluded groups” insofar as they are both economically well-off and white. Now, many of them (whether rightly or wrongly) surely *feel* excluded from the political system, as I would imagine many members of the KKK did, as well. Herein lays the basic set of problems. It is not clear whether being “excluded” is an objective or subjective condition. It is also not clear whether being “excluded” is a function of particular attributes like one’s race, class, or gender, or whether it is (also) a function of one’s political, moral or religious beliefs *vis-à-vis* the dominant belief system. As such, I think about social

movements as involving excluded or marginalized groups, but that it is possible to be (or at least feel) marginalized on the basis of one's ideas.

On to the second issue with McAdam's definition. I think he is right that social movements, by definition, utilize "noninstitutional forms of political participation." This is what distinguishes social movements from interest groups, voters or lobbyists. The problem is just that this definition leaves vague *why* social movements utilize these political tactics. The reason, as I understand it, is because, even in relatively open and responsive contexts, the political system is often dominated by powerful actors. Those without connections to powerful actors, therefore, need to find other ways of generating political power. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter III, social movements develop political power by disrupting institutional processes through forms of collective action, such as protests, blockades, boycotts and strikes. Putting this all together, then, I define social movements as *organized* efforts, often on the part of *marginalized* peoples (or people with marginalized ideas), to leverage *collective action* in order to achieve *political power*.

What then, is the role of social movements in democracy? Clearly social movements act as "reformers" insofar as they seek to contest and influence existing institutions. This role is critically important and has been the driving force behind making institutions more inclusive, more equitable, and more democratic (Zinn 1980; Piven 2006). But, especially from the perspective of radical democracy, social movements do more than that. They not only influence existing institutions, but also develop alternative ways of doing democracy itself. Social movements develop forms of organization, modes of communication, and types of action that illuminate novel ways of thinking about and practicing democracy. In this sense, social movements are not only "reformers" of existing institutions, but also "innovators" of democratic

practice. Whereas the former view understands the importance of social movements primarily in terms of their external effects on law and policy, the latter understands the importance of social movements primarily in terms of their internal innovations – how they organize, communicate and act together. This, of course, is not to say that social movements are necessarily democratic, but rather that (some) social movements (some of the time) can be democratic – and, occasionally, can be expressions of highly democratic impulses and innovators of radically democratic practices. Since social movements have the capacity to engage in radical democracy, theorists of radical democracy ought to incorporate insights from outside the academy, from movement actors and movement practices themselves. As such, this research will position social movements as relevant contributors to ongoing debates within democratic theory. In the second half of the dissertation, I employ the theoretical insights of social movement practices and use these to inform debates within democratic theory – debates that, I believe can be improved by considering such perspectives.

The methodology of moving from the politics of social movements to normative theory – of using the rhetoric and practices of ‘non-theorists’ as a way of building theory – is by no means without precedent. Young’s (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference* was an effort to critique purely distributive theories of justice from the perspective of social movements who viewed justice in terms of recognition and self-determination, while offering an account of justice that seemed to align with the concern of social movement actors actually engaged in struggles for justice. Similarly, Schlosberg’s (2007, 5) *Defining Environmental Justice* brings “empirical evidence and activist definitions to the attention of theorists of justice for their serious consideration, and...offer[s] activists and movements a theoretical overview of the positions and demands they express.” Moving from social movements’ rhetoric and practices has helped

enrich the theoretical debates about the nature of justice. However, the usefulness of this methodology applies beyond justice theory.

Scholars of radical democracy have often utilized real-world examples of grassroots democratic organizing to amend, critique, or construct democratic theory. For example, Apostolidis (2010) utilizes interviews with immigrant meatpackers who engaged in a sustained campaign to democratize their union and their workplace to suggest that immigrant workers have something to “teach America about democracy.” Coles (2005, 213-237) discusses the radically democratic politics of the Industrial Areas Foundation – specifically, its “continual movement of meetings and members around the various neighborhoods and institutions of an urban area” (*ibid.* 225). He uses this research to cultivate the notion that democracy is better understood as the act of “tabling” rather than a fixed and stable “table” that we all sit around. In other words, radical democracy is best thought of not as a single, common public space, but as a diversity of spaces that place people in contact with different types of people and facilitate such conversations. Though I sympathize with this notion, (and tabling no doubt captures an important aspect of radical democracy), it does not capture well the radically democratic aspiration that people actually exercise power, nor does it capture the raucous and fluid forms of democracy that characterize protests and occupations. What metaphors might emerge if the focal point was on the unruly practices that characterized the 2011 occupations? To the extent that radical democracy is in conflict with the state-form, we need to better conceptualize what a non-state democracy might look like.

Others have highlighted this tension between radical democracy and the state. In an effort to highlight the conflict – and even danger – that is involved with the creation of certain public spheres, Kathy Ferguson (2010) utilizes writings and speeches from Emma Goldman and

Alexander Berkman to develop an account of the formation of the first anarchist counterpublics in the United States. Discussing a more contemporary social movement, Michael Ferguson's (2012, 137-163) *Sharing Democracy* discusses the 2006 immigrant rights protests to show how an inter-subjective process of self-authorization can enable the active exercise of political freedom, even among people who are not formally considered citizens by the state. I focus on (somewhat different) forms of self-authorized action in Chapter III. Finally, both Hardt and Negri's (2004) *Multitude* and Maeckelbergh's (2009) *The Will of the Many* highlight the alterglobalization movements' networked structure, arguing that this form of organization has the capacity to foster a truly grassroots transnational democracy – one that enables communication and collective action, while still fostering difference and diversity. I focus on this set of works and ideas in Chapter IV. Broadly speaking, my project proceeds in the same spirit, mobilizing insights from the more anarchic contemporary social movements in order to develop insights in democratic theory.

#### **IV. Challenges for Radical Democracy**

If social movements can be viewed as innovators of democratic practice – if, in other words, they are where radical democrats should look for inspiration – then this leads to a basic problem. What happens to every social movement? Where, for example, are Occupy and the *Indignados* today? In short, they have largely disappeared. Social movements do not last. Thus, if we think of social movements as the core of democracy, the unhappy conclusion seems to be that democracy itself cannot last. This is the challenge posed by Wolin's (2008, 254) concept of “fugitive democracy” and it raises challenging questions about the viability of radical democracy. In this section, I address two concerns about the potential for radical democracy to function as an ongoing project of self-governance in the contemporary world; the first challenge

focuses on the issue of “fugitivity,” while the second challenge raises issues of scale, complexity and pluralism.

### *Fugitivity*

For the radical democrat, as I have already argued, democracy is not really a form of government at all, but rather a political practice of citizens in which they organize themselves and exert collective power – often opposed to the government. According to Wolin (1996, 31), a prominent advocate of this view, democracy concerns citizens’ “possibilities for becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of actions for realizing them.” Understood in this way, democracy occurs in those moments when people act together – democracy is in the protest, in the march, in the occupation, in the public assembly. But this raises a question: if democracy occurs only in momentary outbursts of popular participation, then democracy is always fleeting, always on the run. In fact, this is precisely what Wolin theorizes: democracy is fugitive and momentary.

*Institutionalization marks the attenuation of democracy: leaders begin to appear; hierarchies develop; experts of one kind or another cluster around the centers of decision; order, procedure, and precedent displace a more spontaneous politics...Democracy thus seems destined to be a moment rather than form (ibid., 39; emphasis added).*

We cannot expect democracy to last and attempts to institutionalize it are bound to fail.

Moreover, democracy under this conceptualization appears as primarily reactive and defensive; it aims, in Wolin’s (2008, 258) words, to “recover lost ground.” If democracy only occurs as a response to exclusion or oppression or domination, then democracy, perversely, seems to require its antithesis in order to appear.<sup>1</sup> Beyond that – since “government is a full-time, continuous activity” and democratic “politics is inevitably episodic, born of necessity, improvisational rather than institutionalized” (Wolin 2008, 255) – we can expect the exclusions,

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<sup>1</sup> As I discuss in Chapter III, a similar view is implied by Ranciere’s division between “politics” and “police.”

oppressions, and dominations that characterize the non-democracy of statist politics to reappear once the democratic moment dies down. Even worse, on Wolin's account, it seems we cannot avoid this conclusion because democracy itself cannot handle the necessary tasks of governance. Thus, Wolin's (1996, 42) pessimistic conclusion: "Democracy in the late modern world cannot be a complete political system, and...it ought not be hoped or striven for."

On the one hand, I understand and sympathize with Wolin's pessimism. His conclusion seems a perfectly reasonable and well-justified response to the actual history of social movements and democratic governance over the past 50 years, if not over the past several hundred. Moreover, I cannot claim to present a compelling vision for a "complete political system" capable of resolving either our timeless political quandaries (e.g. balancing liberty and equality) or timely political problems (e.g. climate change or corporate power). On the other hand, I cannot resist the optimism, creativity and energy that animate the radically democratic practices of contemporary social movements. Certainly these actors think that transforming and recreating democratic self-governance on a long-term basis is a goal worth hoping for and working toward. I feel compelled, therefore, to ask: Might there be a way to conceptualize radical democracy as a political practice that can exist on its own terms? Can democracy, as a way for people to organize themselves, function on a more continuous basis? I return to this possibility in Chapter III, where I develop the practice of direct action as a mode of civic engagement that can potentially transcend a "fugitive" status, and in Chapter IV, where I develop the idea of networks as an organizational form that enable coordination, cooperation and, ultimately, self-governance. Though I sympathize with Wolin's concerns, I contend that he is overly pessimistic about the positive, constructive and transformative potentials embedded in many social movement practices. In short, I propose to take seriously the claim that "This is

what democracy looks like!” by considering the potential for direct action and networked organization to function as core practices for ongoing experiments in radically democratic self-governance.

### *Complexity and Scale*

But, is this ideal of self-governance no longer possible in the context of our diverse and complex societies? Direct and participatory forms of democracy, the argument goes, made sense in small, isolated and homogenous communities. Only in such circumstances could we expect people to participate in face-to-face meetings, reach consensus and enact policies that promoted the common good. Rousseau – the “theorist *par excellence*” of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970, 22) – would not be optimistic about its prospects for the contemporary world. Moreover, empirical studies of Vermont’s town hall meetings, which is perhaps the clearest contemporary example of the old radical democratic ideal of the face-to-face assembly, demonstrate convincingly that the degree of democratic participation is inversely related to the size of the town: the bigger the town, the lower the rates of participation (Bryan 2004, 69-81). Thus, the conclusion seems to be that radical democracy, at least insofar as it is understood as an inclusive, deliberative, face-to-face assembly is wholly unworkable given contemporary conditions. We have too many people and these people are too diverse and have too little time. Moreover, contemporary issues are too numerous and too complex, requiring a great deal of specialized knowledge and expertise, to be solved by participatory democratic assemblies. In short, the size, pluralism and complexity of our current situation suggest to many observers that the radical democratic ideal is impossible. Must we conclude, therefore, that radical democracy is doomed?



Habermas (1996, 471) puts the challenge this way: it is not clear “how a radically democratic republic might even be conceived today.” Given the realities of the world today – the facts of globalization and pluralism, for example – what would it even mean to conceptualize (let alone practice) radical democracy? The theory that I develop in this dissertation is an attempt to conceptualize a radical democracy that is relevant to, and feasible in, our world today. Under contemporary conditions, how might citizens actually shape the world around them and determine the conditions of their lives? In other words, this dissertation is meant as one possible answer to Habermas’s question: What might ‘rule by the people’ – radically conceived – actually look like today? Answering this question will lead me to upset a number of assumptions about what democracy looks like. Indeed the model of democratic politics I sketch in subsequent chapters suggests that democracy can and should look very different from its current, state-centric forms. A vibrant democratic politics need not involve such standard notions as clearly-bounded polities, elections, or even unifying decisions. Moreover, in developing this argument, I will employ the insights of anti-authoritarian social movements and political thinkers who are among the most vociferous critics of actually-existing democratic regimes. In doing so, however, I do not abandon democracy, but seek to reinvigorate it.

This is, of course, not the first time the viability of the democratic ideal has been called into question, nor is it the first time a radical reinvention of the concept has been attempted. As Hardt and Negri (2004, 237-38) beautifully explain:

Advocates of democracy in early modern Europe and North America were confronted by skeptics who told them that democracy must have been possible in the confines of the Athenian polis but was unimaginable in the extended territories of the modern nation-states. Today, advocates of democracy in the age of globalization are met by skeptics who claim that democracy may have been possible within the confines of the national territory but is unimaginable on a global scale.

The eighteenth-century democratic revolutionaries, of course, did not simply repropose democracy in its ancient form. Instead their task, aimed in part at addressing the question of scale, was to reinvent the concept and create new institutional forms and practices...[L]ike the revolutionaries of the early modern period, we will once again have to reinvent the concept of democracy and create new institutional forms and practices appropriate to our global age.

Those of us who still believe in radical democracy do so not because we think that the same old mechanisms and procedures – the directly democratic assembly, for example – are apt or novel solutions for our contemporary situation. Rather, we are optimistic because we believe that democracy can, again, be reinvented, with different practices, taking on new forms. To return to the epigraph – “our dreams do not fit in their ballot boxes” – our ideals of democracy are not fulfilled by existing democratic institutions. However, instead of relinquishing democracy, we challenge it and hope to reinvigorate it.

## **V. The Plan for the Dissertation**

The chapters that follow can be divided into two parts. Part I (Chapters I and II) develops an *Anti-Authoritarian Perspective on Freedom and Power*, while Part II (Chapters III and IV) uses this perspective to make *Interventions in Democratic Theory*.

### *Part I: Anti-Authoritarian Perspectives on Freedom and Power*

In Part I, I proceed in a somewhat unconventional fashion. Indeed, the most natural place to build a foundation for a radically democratic politics outside the state would seem to be with students and practitioners of anarchism who have developed visions of how a decentralized, non-hierarchical society might be organized. To be sure, there is a long history practical experiments with radical democracy, ranging from the anarchists and syndicalists during the Spanish Civil War (Orwell 1952; Bookchin 2007, 91-92), to the Students for a Democratic Society in the United States (Hayden and Flacks 2002), to the Paris Commune of 1968 (Ross 2004). More recently, social movements have emerged from the jungles of Chiapas (Notes from Nowhere

2003) to the factory floors of Argentina (Sitrin 2006), from the streets of Seattle to the streets of Athens (Schwarz, Sagris and Void Network 2010), from the occupied Tahir Square (Madgrial 2011) to occupied Zuccotti Park (Taylor and Gessen 2011). In all of these places – and regardless of the specific demands or stated objectives of these movements – a similar model of decentralized organization, decision-making, and action has been employed and continually redeveloped. However, rather than drawing primarily on these practical examples, or on the classical anarchist thinkers – in particular, theorists associated with what Ackelsberg (1997, 158) calls “communalist anarchism” (e.g. Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon) – I opt for an alternative approach to developing this “anti-authoritarian perspective.”

I focus, instead, on sources of anti-authoritarian political thinking from a) within the libertarian political tradition, and b) from the anthropology of non-state societies. I think these are under-utilized sources within political theory for the development of such a perspective and are worthy of additional attention. Making an argument for a radical democracy from within the classical anarchist tradition would not be particularly novel, nor would it speak to people who do not already share the same basic political commitments. In contrast, building an account of radical democracy that has foundations in libertarian thinking – generally assumed to be essentially synonymous with neoliberalism in the U.S. context – and from anthropological accounts of “primitive societies” – generally assumed to be non-democratic or even pre-political – may be more intriguing and can possibly speak to a broader audience. At a minimum, I hope to show that there are some surprising affinities between these schools of thought, and useful insights to be gleaned from them about the nature of freedom and power, and the relationship between these two concepts.

In Chapter I, “Reclaiming Libertarianism,” I contend that, in the United States, libertarianism has become wrongly identified with neoliberalism. Rather than challenging the centralization of state power, neoliberalism seeks to redirect state power in the interest of capital. After disentangling this problematic association, I position libertarianism within the anarchist and anti-authoritarian political tradition. In the bulk of the chapter, I reinterpret two key libertarian theorists, F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, to argue that their most basic political commitments – support for individual freedom and skepticism toward centralized power – need not lead down the path of radical individualism, which understands freedom as a fundamentally private affair and conceptualizes democracy as a form of majoritarian coercion. Instead, I contend that the libertarian skepticism toward centralized power is compatible with – and even points in the direction of – a conceptualization of freedom in public and egalitarian terms. After showing why the standard libertarian commitments to self-sovereignty and freedom as non-interference are wrongheaded, I offer an alternative account of freedom as non-domination, grounded in the republican tradition. Non-domination, by focusing on power inequities between people, conceptualizes freedom as fundamentally relational and non-sovereign. In this way, I open the door to a conversation between libertarian and radically democratic politics, showing how each can draw on and learn from the other. I conclude by arguing that libertarians, who have a basic commitment to individual freedom, ought to theorize and endorse democracy as a form of political organization in which power is widely and equitably distributed so as to avoid relationships of domination.

In Chapter II, “The Indian Against Leviathan,” I move from concerns about self-sovereignty and freedom, to concerns about state sovereignty and centralized power. I begin by arguing that the republican concept of freedom as non-domination (argued for in the previous

chapter) is, from an anti-authoritarian perspective, a fundamentally anti-statist principle. The sovereign state – “the principle of an authority which is external and the creator of its own legality” (Clastres 1987, 44) – is a dominating entity. Republican and liberal attempts to limit or constrain the state – through institutions such as divided powers and rights – while not trivial, do not change the nature of sovereignty. To be sovereign is to have the final word and to possess the means of violence to enforce that word. Moreover, to be sovereign is to be able to make exceptions to the rules, if not to change them outright. Such an entity in society is fundamentally at odds with freedom as non-domination.

Then, in the second half of the chapter, I show that there is an alternative to state sovereignty and centralized power. While the statist organization of power seeks to concentrate or unify society’s capacities for violence into a single entity (the state) in order to quash acts of violence by others in society, I will argue that this is neither a necessary nor desirable move, at least from the perspective of freedom as non-domination. To develop this alternative, I turn to the field of anthropology, specifically studies on the ways that non-state societies both resist state incorporation and organize themselves without recourse to the state-form. Although nonstate societies were indeed permeated by political power, this fact did not lead inexorably to the centralization of power in the state-form, but instead fostered power’s decentralization. Indeed, power was organized in ways that prevented the rise of the state, and the monopolization of power it entails. As I make these two arguments, I slowly develop two opposing logics of power. The first logic I call *centripetal power*, which is an organization of power that tends toward its centralization – it is the logic expressed in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. The second logic of power I call *centrifugal power*, which is an organization of power that tends towards its dispersion – it is the logic expressed by certain non-state, indigenous peoples. . Throughout the

chapter, I characterize this distinction between *centrifugal* non-statist power and *centripetal* statist power as a conflict between the “Indian,” on the one hand, and the “Leviathan,” on the other.

## *Part II: Interventions in Democratic Theory*

In Part II, I ask: How might the theoretical insights of the anti-authoritarian perspective intervene in democratic theory? More specifically, if we: a) adopt a view of freedom as non-domination, b) reject sovereignty in both its individual and state forms, c) and take on a centrifugal logic of power, then where would that lead a corresponding account of radical democracy? In short, what might an anti-authoritarian model of democracy look like?

To provide a partial answer to this question – and I will only be able to offer a partial answer – I focus on two distinct, but related, anarchic social movement practices: direct action and networked organization. My aim here is to walk a middle ground between two competing approaches within the literature on anti-authoritarian visions of radical democracy. On the one hand, some scholars abandon the more anarchic elements of anti-authoritarianism in their effort to present a workable vision of radical democracy. On the other hand, other scholars maintain the more anarchic elements of anti-authoritarianism, but do not connect these elements with the literature on radical democracy or defend them on democratic grounds.

Perhaps the best recent statement of the former approach is Bookchin’s vision of an anti-authoritarian democracy. While Bookchin (2007, 91-99) explicitly rejects the moniker of anarchism in favor of “communalism” (due in large part to his perception that anarchism is too sympathetic to individualism and too critical of democracy), his proposal still draws heavily on aspects of anarchist thought. He traces the historical origins of communalism to the Paris Commune of 1871 and sees it as a vision in which “virtually autonomous local communities are

loosely bound in a federation” (Bookchin 2007, 99). The concrete political proposal to emerge out of communalism is “libertarian municipalism,” which calls for governing based on “popular democratic assemblies” and addressing “community affairs on a face-to-face basis [and] making policy decisions in a direct democracy” (*ibid.* 101). While Bookchin’s vision has much in common with the democratic vision I endorse, he remains wedded to more traditional modes of decision-making. For him, the ancient Athenian *polis* and, more recently, the New England townhall meeting are the prototypical democratic institutions (*ibid.* 105; Biehl 1998, Ch. 3 and 4). In short, he remains tied to the old radically democratic ideal of the face-to-face assembly, that I think critics of radical democracy are right to be skeptical about. The model of democracy I articulate differs with this vision on at least two counts: 1) I do not equate radical democracy with direct democracy and, in fact, argue for direct action, rather than direct democracy. 2) I challenge the notion that decisions must be made through formalized channels (whether they be direct or representative) at all. Instead, I maintain that decisions can *emerge* through networked organization without ever being *made* in unified general assemblies. In essence, I see Bookchin as foregrounding practices like general assemblies that are relatively easy to fold into a democratic framework, but neglecting practices like direct action and networks that, while central to anti-authoritarian movements and thinkers, are more problematic (but also, more interesting) for democracy.

Other theorists who maintain a stronger attachment to these more anarchic elements, however, do offer a “vision of an ideal (egalitarian, non-hierarchical) society, and a strategy for achieving it, based on direct action and what Colin Ward has termed ‘spontaneous organization’” (Ackelsberg 1997, 158). This body of anarchist theorizing bears closer resemblance to the approach to radical democracy that I develop in the second half of the dissertation. For example,

Ward's (1982) has argued for the potential for harmony to exist through complexity and for the viability of "topless federations." My aim in relation to this work is to better connect these concepts with democratic theory. While Bookchin develops a compelling vision of radical democracy, he does so by prioritizing direct democracy over anarchism. In contrast, Ward foregrounds anarchism, but neglects democracy. He develops a contemporary anarchist theory of self-organization, but does not connect his vision to democracy or democratic norms. I suggest that anarchic conceptions, such as direct action, "topless federations" and self-organization, can be theorized in a democratic framework. In a sense, I build on the existing literature by seeking to translate the ideas of anarchists and anti-authoritarians into the language of democratic theory and, moreover, explain how anarchists might articulate their ideas in (critical) relation to the concerns of democratic theory (e.g. 'the people,' legitimacy, and global democracy). Doing so, I think, will help explain a way of theorizing a radical democracy that eschews many of the usual trappings of state-centric democracy, while nonetheless constituting a mode of action and organization that can be fairly conceptualized as democratic and defended on democratic grounds.

In Chapter III, "The Democratic Potential of Direct Action," I put direct action – a practice in which people aim to accomplish their goals through their own activity (Sparrow n.d.) – in conversation with democratic theory in an effort to uncover the tensions and affinities between the two. Insofar as direct action involves a small segment of the *demos* directly intervening in the lives of other citizens it could well be seen as a violation of democratic principles and procedures. Despite this basic tension, however, there are important reasons to defend the democratic potential of direct action. Namely, if radical democracy is, fundamentally, a situation in which people have power, than practices that foster and enact



collective power have the potential to be democratic. I develop two forms of power that direct action mobilizes: disruptive power and prefigurative power. In developing accounts of these two forms of power, I challenge two reductions in contemporary democratic theory, one characteristic of mainstream communicative democrats and the other characteristic of radical democrats. First, because direct action is not primarily or exclusively a dialogical act, it necessarily upsets the tendency to reduce democracy to deliberation and communication. Whereas voting, lobbying, or writing – and even many forms of rallying or protesting – are primarily oriented toward having voice, direct action is oriented toward having power. I contend that the disruptive power of direct action, which halts institutional processes and interrupts the activities of others, is democratic when it exposes, upsets, or reduces power inequalities and makes real the political equality upon which democracy depends. Second, I use direct action's prefigurative power to challenge the reduction of democratic politics to a politics of resistance. While direct action is most assuredly a practice that intervenes and disrupts, it is not just a politics that resists, but also one that creates and prefigures. I show through an analysis of the double-sided character of direct action a way to theorize a radical democratic politics that transcends resistance and is capable of articulating and building an alternative society. My goal in this chapter is to highlight the democratic potential of direct action, and to open the door to a reconsideration of the role of power in a vibrant democratic politics. I conclude the chapter by articulating a set of guidelines or criteria by which we might evaluate and/or amplify the democratic potentials of direct action. Connecting this to the previous chapter, disruptive and prefigurative power is democratic when it follows a centrifugal logic that spreads power and creates spaces for others to exercise political freedom.

In Chapter IV, “Network Democracy,” I show one way in which social movements have dispersed the power that direct action generates through the use of networks as a form of organization. If direct action constitutes a core democratic practice, I theorize networks as the organizational framework that enables these relatively autonomous and local practices to fit together in a much larger, more diffuse, and more powerful whole. Just as elections are the link between the practice of voting and a system of representative governance, networks are the mechanism that connects direct actions together into a “system” of self-governance. However, even though direct action is an exercise of power and even though the cumulative effect of these actions through political networks can be considered a form of self-governance, the result need not be a new form of authoritarian “rule over,” nor must this power constitute an emergent sovereign. In contrast, I argue that networks are a social movement practice that functions to both disperse power and to make self-governance possible without creating new forms of sovereignty. To make this argument, I first present evidence for the possibility governance without government through an examination of Ostrom’s (1990) work on self-governance of common resources. She demonstrates that self-organization and self-governance – without recourse to either the state or the market – is possible, in certain contexts. Her work, therefore, is critical for thinking through the forms that self-governance might take. However, her work also has serious limitations for assessing the capacity for self-governance in more diverse and diffuse contexts. Not only are Ostrom’s case studies of successful self-governance based on relatively small communities (rather than the transnational and global communities that comprise “the multitude”), but they are often quite homogenous. And, it is precisely the facts of difference and diversity that are the starting point for a range of contemporary democratic theories, and are generally seen as presenting problems for democratic self-governance. Through a review of this

literature, I outline two competing responses to the fact of pluralism. The first response seeks to overcome difference in order to form a unified *demos* capable of ruling. The second response rejects the ideal of consensus and unanimity implicit in the first response, and proposes instead a vision of democracy characterized by ongoing conflict and contestation. While there is much to be admired in this approach, I contend that it offers little in the way of a positive prescription for governing – or at least acting together – in the context of ineradicable agonism.

My aim in the second half of the chapter is to provide one response to this challenge, to see what may come from an engagement between a theory of self-governance and a theory of agonal democracy. The primary mechanism for fostering the goals of both – enabling self-governance in the context of difference – is the network as a form of political organization. I theorize networks as valuable because they enable *cooperation without consensus* and *action without agreement*. More broadly, they enable *democracy without (unified) decision*. I consider the applicability of networked self-governance on two very different geographic scales. First, I briefly discuss the potential to mobilize networks on a transnational or global level in order to “scale-up” democracy. Here, I consider the possibilities for networks to function as coordinating mechanisms for democratic action across borders. Second, I argue that networked forms of organization can be usefully conceptualized and applied at lower levels of governance, as well. So, in this sense, I “scale-down” networks and think about their utility on a much smaller scale, when people share a similar geographic space. Whereas others have theorized the democratic potential of networks on a transnational scale, I theorize their potential as an alternative to the general assembly. I argue against “direct democracy” and for “network democracy.” Whereas Occupy and other social movements emphasize consensus forms of decision-making when sharing a common space, I argue that networks – precisely because they enable people to decide

differently – can be meaningfully applied locally, as well. Finally, I connect the various themes of the chapter – self-governance, the challenges of pluralism, and the possibilities of decentralized networked organization. I explain how, and to what extent, networks can foster self-governance in the context of difference and discuss the implications of this for the way we conceptualize democracy.

Taken together, my dissertation seeks to contribute to the project of radical democracy by putting anti-authoritarian perspectives squarely in conversation with democratic theory. On the one hand, what would an anti-authoritarian vision of democracy look like? On the other hand, what would it look like to defend anti-authoritarianism or anarchism on democratic grounds? Engaging in a conversation between anti-authoritarians and democrats promises to enrich both interlocutors. First, anti-authoritarians – despite their ambivalent relationship with democracy – often couch their political positions in broadly democratic terms. This conversation will help anti-authoritarian activists sharpen their evaluation of democratic potentials of their practices. Second, democratic theory stands to gain from this conversation by considering the insights of anti-authoritarian thinkers and social movements on enduring questions, such as the meaning of “rule by the people” and the viability of democratic coordination in the context of difference. Anti-authoritarian theory and practice suggests novel answers to debates within democratic theory and may help democratic theorists conceptualize a radical democracy that is viable in our contemporary context. As I argue in the conclusion, this encounter between anti-authoritarianism and democratic theory, should orient us toward a view of democracy as the dispersion of power. If radical democracy means a situation in which people have power, the challenge for the radical democrat today is one of both resistance and reconstruction: to contest all forms of centralized power, while simultaneously building practices that actively disperse

power and enable the decentralized exercise of freedom. It is the concept of freedom that I take up in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER ONE

### RECLAIMING LIBERTARIANISM: *TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS*

#### I. Anti-Authoritarianism, Libertarianism and Neoliberalism

On the eve of an anarchist-led street celebration of Margaret Thatcher's death, an editorial appeared in *The Telegraph* bearing the headline: "Anarchists should be mourning Margaret Thatcher's death, not celebrating it. She did more to roll back the frontier of the state than any other prime minister" (Young 2013). And such is the state of anti-authoritarian politics within mainstream discourse in much of the Western world. The anti-authoritarian imaginary has been so reduced that "rolling back the state" means little more than a neoliberal call to cut welfare programs and social spending, privatize public enterprises and attack unionized labor. In such a context, to be opposed to the state is to support Thatcher's class warfare. It is, in other words, to support neoliberalism.

In the United States, the term libertarian has come to mean not (only) an opposition to centralized state power and a commitment to individual freedom, but rather to signify support for neoliberal capitalism and an opposition to collective endeavors – indeed an opposition to politics itself. Paradoxically, libertarianism – insofar as it provides ideological support for the neoliberal regime – is, in fact, not an anti-statist theory at all. In the U.S., the term libertarian has been used not so much to resist the centralized power of the state, but to *mobilize* and *redirect* state power in the interest of capital. As David Harvey (2005, 2 and 19) has shown, while neoliberal *theory* – often attributed to F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman – is grounded in the belief that the political economy of society is best organized by "liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade," its primary *political* task has been to "re-establish the conditions for capital

accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.” In essence, neoliberal policies have amounted to a form of class warfare carried out by capital against labor. Most bluntly, both Thatcher and Reagan prioritized a direct assault on what each perceived as a bastion of labor union power: the defeat of the miners’ union in the U.K. and the air traffic controllers’ union in the U.S. Perhaps even more pernicious have been the general trends regarding income and wealth inequality since the rise of neoliberal policies toward the end of the 1970s and early 1980s. To take but two examples: 1) the share of both income and wealth of the top 1%, which had been steadily falling since the Great Depression, began to rise dramatically again around 1980 and this trend has continued to the present day; 2) Real wages, which had been rising proportionally with productivity began to stagnate since 1980, despite productivity continuing to rise, resulting in rising profit rates (*ibid.* 15 – 25). More recently, the approximately \$700 billion bailout of the major U.S. banks in 2008 remains perhaps the clearest recent example of a “neoliberal state...a state apparatus whose fundamental mission was to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital” (*ibid.* 7).

In the developing world, the deeply statist character of neoliberalism has been even clearer. In Iraq, for example, after the U.S.-led invasion and occupation, the full force of the most powerful state in the world aimed to provide conditions for profitable capital accumulation. The Coalition Provisional Authority, under Paul Bremer, ensured that international capital was given greater freedom in the form the privatization of state-owned enterprises, full ownership rights by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses and full repatriation of foreign profits. “The labour market, on the other hand, was to be strictly regulated. Strikes were effectively forbidden in key sectors and the right to unionize was restricted” (*ibid.* 6). To take one other striking example, consider the rise of neoliberalism in Chile. As Naomi Klein (2007) has demonstrated, neoliberal policies –

with Friedman's explicit support – came to Chile through the brutal military regime of Augusto Pinochet. How supposed libertarians such as Friedman could defend neoliberalism in Chile – to, for example, use words like “free markets” in a context in which tens of thousands of political dissidents were tortured (*ibid.* 146) – belies his primary professed political commitment to human freedom. More broadly, neoliberalism in the developing world often requires an aggressive and violent state to implement its policies and suppress dissent to them. Lesley Gill (2000) has aptly described neoliberalization in Bolivia as the “armed retreat of the...state.” This phrase – the armed retreat of the state – well captures the basic problem with identifying libertarianism with neoliberalism (or using the former as ideological justification for the latter). Quite simply, neoliberalism neither objects to centralized state power nor prioritizes human freedom – as Eduard Galeano succinctly described the situation in Pinochet's Chile, “People were in prison so that prices could be free” (Klein 2007, 114). Libertarianism in the United States has therefore become a political perspective that actively promotes its inverse: an assertion of centralized state power in the interests of capital at the expense of the freedom's of most everyone else. Moreover, while libertarians in the United States (most accurately called neoliberals) claim to oppose concentrated state power – a claim that seems transparently false given the *active state interventions* mentioned above – they wholly ignore concentrated power in the economy. This arbitrary distinction between concentrated power in government and concentrated power in the economy is untenable and is at the root of why American libertarians remain blind to the economic tyrannies that so many people must endure.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Van Parijs' (1995) *Real Freedom for All*, for example, starts from the premise (shared by right-libertarians) that freedom is the most important political value, but argues that the inequality and exploitation, which characterize the capitalist economy, inhibit real freedom for most people. In doing so, he develops a left-libertarian or, on his account, “real-libertarian,” perspective.



Despite this corruption and co-optation of the term “libertarian” in recent U.S. politics, it has a far richer history. Libertarianism has its origins within anarchist politics. Politically, the term libertarian was first used by French anarcho-communist Joseph Dejacque (*libertaire*, in French) in 1857 (The Anarchist FAQ Editorial Collective 2008). In 1880, at the French regional anarchist congress in Le Havre the term libertarian was again used and a pamphlet released the following year was titled “Libertarian or Anarchist Communism” (*ibid.*). To this day, the term libertarian is used as a synonym for anarchists and other anti-state socialists outside the United States.

Because of the number of different strands of anarchism and differences between anarchists and other libertarian socialists that I need not discuss, I use the broader term “anti-authoritarian” to encapsulate a more general political perspective. I mean anti-authoritarianism to signify: 1) a commitment to freedom or liberty as the highest political value; 2) a skepticism toward and desire to reduce, if not eliminate, centralized power (such as, but by no means limited to, the state) and an opposition to the arbitrary hierarchy and coercion that such centralized power often entails; 3) a belief in the capacity of voluntary self-organization to foster social coordination and solve common problems. To be libertarian is to be anti-authoritarian. To be anti-authoritarian is to be libertarian. To be either, entails a general agreement with the above principles.

Within mainstream discourse, however, such a view is clearly not widespread. Indeed, in this country, libertarianism – a view that I contend is more appropriately defined as neoliberalism – remains the “go-to” freedom ideology. If one is committed, first and foremost to freedom, then it is often assumed that one is committed to libertarianism in this uniquely American sense. In short, neoliberalism has a stranglehold over much of the discourse regarding

freedom and liberty in this country and has led to a deeply problematic politics. Given the contemporary appeal and popularity of libertarianism, I reinterpret two key libertarian theorists, F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, to argue that their most basic political commitments (i.e. the three points noted above) need not lead down the path of radical individualism and neoliberal capitalism, which understands freedom as a fundamentally private affair and conceptualizes democracy – indeed the political sphere itself – as a form of majoritarian coercion. In essence, I have in mind an internal critique of libertarianism: the starting premises of its founders do not sit easily with its conclusions. Moreover, if I am correct, its basic commitments actually point toward an anti-authoritarian democratic politics, one that I suspect is in tension with the neoliberal capitalism with which their theories are identified. Certainly, there are other theoretical resources from which to begin an account of anti-authoritarian democracy, but given the contemporary appeal of libertarian thinking, and the fact that I share (some) of their starting points, I think it useful to begin here. In addition, I want to introduce an alternative way of thinking about libertarianism from the outset because their ideas will reappear throughout the dissertation.

In this chapter, I focus on the libertarian belief in the primacy of human freedom and argue that this basic political commitment points in the direction of a conceptualization of freedom as non-domination, a move which opens libertarian thought to seeing freedom as a public and relational concept. In particular, I would like to show how a basic anti-authoritarian or libertarian orientation is compatible with and, in fact, oriented toward theorizing freedom in a radically democratic sense, as akin to non-sovereign self-determination. Such an argument is, I believe, precisely what Miguel Absensour (2011, 100) has in mind when he recommends “an encounter between the ‘political principle’ [that is, democracy] and the libertarian spirit, each

taking a step toward the other.” In what sense, must each liberty and democracy “step toward” the other? On the one hand, the unshakable libertarian commitment to freedom ought to help reframe democracy such that democracy is not identified with rule by the majority through the coercive apparatus of the centralized state. If democracy is “to keep pace with the modern idea of liberty, it cannot do otherwise than to take full measure of the problem of the State” (*ibid.* 91). On the other hand, democracy – or as Abensour puts it the “political principle” – must help to reframe liberty such that liberty does not devolve into a “conquering and predator autonomy” (*ibid.*). That is, libertarians must see how a conception of liberty that is based on an ideal of individual autonomy or self-sovereignty is necessarily one that impinges on the liberty of others and becomes a self-defeating principle. Rather than thinking about democracy as an antidote to too much freedom (and as a way of promoting welfare, justice or some other social value), I want to suggest a way of thinking about democracy as a way of exercising freedom and a way of thinking about freedom that implies a democratic component. Ultimately, I contend that this provides a conceptual link between individual liberty, on the one hand, and collective self-determination, on the other.

In the next section, I show that Hayek and Friedman share the anti-authoritarian political commitments outlined above, even though I believe they both depart significantly from these principles in their support for neoliberal capitalism. Then, in section III, I explain why Hayek and Friedman are skeptical about democratic politics. I argue that, on the one hand, their concerns about state-based majoritarian democracy are persuasive, but that, on the other hand, this identification of politics with the state wrongly leads them to view freedom as necessarily apolitical (if not anti-political) – freedom as an escape from politics. In section IV, I explain the problems with defining freedom as self-sovereignty, or the ability to have control over one’s

private sphere. While private freedom is without question an element of any libertarian account of freedom, an exclusive focus on self-sovereignty is, I argue, ontologically problematic, internally inconsistent and politically limiting. In section V, I present an alternative account of freedom. If libertarians ought not be committed to self-sovereignty and the view of freedom as non-interference that it implies, what should take its place? Here, using work from Phillip Pettit and Iris Young, I articulate a view of freedom as non-domination and a relational, non-sovereign account of self-determination. On this account, freedom is not to be found (only) outside of politics, but (also) through a radically democratic politics. I conclude by suggesting some criteria for a libertarian or anti-authoritarian democratic theory, in order to lay out the basic framework advanced in the remainder of the dissertation.

## **II. Identifying Anti-Authoritarian Values in Hayek and Friedman**

Hayek, despite a reputation to the contrary, is no mere ideologue for neoliberalism capitalism. Allow me to give but a few examples from *The Road to Serfdom*. At the beginning of chapter one, Hayek (2007, 65) approvingly cites a quote from then-President Franklin Roosevelt in which he laments the concentrated power of corporations in America. Further, Hayek contends that “strong arguments can be advanced that serious shortcomings...particularly with regard to the law of corporations and of patents, not only have made competition work much less effectively than it might have done but have even led to the destruction of competition in many spheres” (*ibid.* 87). Identifying what are arguably two of the defining features of neoliberalism – dominance of economic activity by the corporate form and the extension of patents and intellectual property throughout the world – are serious causes of concern for Hayek. Indeed, he is consistently concerned with how concentrations of power in the economic sector can undermine the possibility of competitive markets and free exchange

among equal players. In a pointed line, which many American “libertarians” would do well to return to, Hayek says that he understands “the just irritation with those who use liberal phraseology in defense of antisocial privileges...” (*ibid.* 72). More broadly, Hayek (*ibid.* 71) explicitly argues that his libertarian commitments are quite flexible and *do not* entail a commitment to laissez-faire economic policies.

The fundamental principle that in the ordering of our affairs we should make as much as possible of the spontaneous forces of society, and resort as little as possible to coercion, is capable of an infinite variety of applications...Probably nothing has done so much harm to the liberal cause as the wooden insistence of some liberals on certain rough rules of thumb, above all the principle of laissez-faire.

Indeed, Hayek’s is a nuanced theory that is keenly aware of the tenuous nature of competitive markets in the context of not only socialism, but capitalism as well.

Despite a number of critical differences between Hayek and Friedman – differences that make Hayek a much more useful theoretical resource for anti-authoritarians – I contend that both theorists endorse the basic anti-authoritarian principles as a starting point for their theories.

While both take these principles in directions I would like to resist, I think that their foundational commitments can fairly be described as anti-authoritarian and it is precisely these basic commitments that make them such compelling theorists for many “libertarians” in America. In any case, allow me to provide some evidence for the claim that, at their core, Hayek and Friedman are committed to anti-authoritarian perspectives. First, each holds a commitment to freedom or liberty as the highest political value. Because I do not suspect this to be a particularly controversial claim, I will move quickly here. In the introduction to *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman – who views himself as a liberal in the classical sense – contends that “freedom [i]s the ultimate goal and the individual [i]s the ultimate entity in society” (2002, 5), where “political freedom means the absence of coercion of a man by his fellow men” (*ibid.* 15).

In the introduction to *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek (2007, 60) expresses his “positive ideal”: “We know that we are fighting for freedom to shape our life according to our ideas.” As I will discuss later, this view of freedom, which goes beyond the mere absence of coercion and implies a collective, political component, can be fruitfully elaborated as (a particular model of) self-determination.

Second, both profess a deep skepticism toward and desire to reduce, if not eliminate, centralized power (such as, but by no means limited to, the state) and an opposition to the arbitrary hierarchy and coercion that such centralized power often entails. Friedman speaks of the “great tragedy of the drive to centralization” (2002, 3), the problematic imposition of “uniform standards” (*ibid.* 4), the requirement that “government power must be dispersed” (*ibid.* 3), and the desirability of having “numerous equipotent small centers of power” (*ibid.* 16). In a particularly illuminating line, Friedman (*ibid.* 6; emphasis added) argues that “[j]ealous of liberty, and hence fearful of centralized power, *whether in governmental or private hands*, the nineteenth-century liberal [who we might call a “libertarian” today] favored political decentralization.” Though Friedman in no serious way tackles the problem of concentrated power in the capitalist economy, he cannot avoid the conclusion that just as concentrated power in the state is a problem, as is concentrated power in the economy. In any case, the essential point is that Friedman is committed (in principle) to this second anti-authoritarian value even if he and his followers have been primary proponents of economic concentration in the economic sphere. Hayek’s concerns about centralized power are even more pervasive. In a sense, he views his entire project in *The Road to Serfdom* as a response to the growing prevalence of totalitarian regimes and what he saw as a growing tendency toward centralization even within the liberal democracies of Europe and North America, all of which he saw as “collectivism” of

various kinds. Each of these systems involves the “deliberate organization of the labors of society for a definite social goal” and aim to “organize the whole of society and all its resources for this unitary end...” (Hayek 2007, 100). Such centralized systems must, therefore, substitute a single judgment, a single plan, for the multiplicity of judgments and plans that would occur were individuals free to choose. Centralization and uniformity cannot but end in a loss of freedom – that is, “freedom from coercion, freedom from the arbitrary power of other men” (*ibid.* 77). While both thinkers carefully lay out various roles for the state – which they see as primarily needed to maintain decentralized and competitive markets – their skepticism toward centralization and their desire to disperse power place them firmly in the anti-authoritarian (albeit not anarchist) camp.

Finally, both express a belief in the capacity and the desirability of voluntary self-organization to foster social coordination and solve common problems. For Friedman (2002, 13):

The basic problem of social organization is how to co-ordinate the economic activities of large numbers of people... The challenge to the believer in liberty is to reconcile this widespread interdependence with individual freedom.

Friedman nicely identifies the essential challenge for any libertarian or anti-authoritarian economic system: to coordinate the activities of large numbers of people without coercion, that is, through voluntary cooperation. Hayek dwells a great deal on the desirability of decentralized and voluntary coordination. He contends, in a statement that bears great similarity to anarchist schools of thought, that he is committed to the “fundamental principle that in the ordering of our affairs we should make as much use as possible of the *spontaneous forces* found in a free society, and resort as little as possible to coercion...” (Hayek 2007, 71; emphasis added). As Loren Lomasky (1987, 108 – 09), explains:

The analysis and defense of a spontaneous order in the work of F.A. Hayek has given us reason to rethink the assumption that a benign social order must primarily be the intended product of design. Hayek argues that spontaneous acts of adjustment by independent agents will regularly generate desirable social outcomes that could not have been foreseen or intended at the outset and that were thus not capable of production according to plan” (Lomasky 1987, 108-09).

On this view, social coordination through spontaneous ordering and voluntary cooperation is not only possible, but is superior to centralized planning. The main reason why decentralized organization is both necessary and preferable has to do with the amazing complexity of modern societies and the corresponding difficulty of any single entity obtaining all the relevant information.

It is only as the factors which have to be taken into account become so numerous that it is impossible to gain a synoptic view of them that decentralization becomes imperative...As decentralization has become necessary because nobody can consciously balance all the considerations bearing on the decisions of so many individuals, the coordination can clearly be effected not by ‘conscious control’ but only by arrangements which convey to each agent the information he must possess in order effectively to adjust his decisions to those of others. (Hayek 2007, 95).

The critical point I would like to draw out here is that Friedman and Hayek are committed to the view that social organization is possible through spontaneous and voluntary cooperation and does not require the presence of either a centralized planner or even a unified goal.

### **III. Why Libertarians are Skeptical about Democratic Politics**

Having elaborated Friedman and Hayek’s basic political commitments within an anti-authoritarian framework, I now aim to show why these viewpoints lead them to be skeptical about democracy. Both thinkers express a fair bit of ambivalence about democracy, praising it as essential for other forms of freedom, on the one hand, and casting it as a form of majoritarian coercion, on the other. At times Hayek seems to speak favorably of democracy (or political freedom), usually in its relation to economic freedom, which he sees as two sides of the same



coin. He first notes that: “We have progressively abandoned that freedom in economic affairs without which personal and political freedom has never existed in the past” (Hayek 2007, 67). And, then, “economic freedom was the outgrowth of a free growth of economic activity which had been the undersigned and unforeseen by-product of political freedom” (*ibid.* 69). In the space of two pages, Hayek completely reverses the causal relationship: He first argues that freedom in economic affairs is the necessary precursor to political freedom, or at least that political freedom cannot exist without economic freedom. He then argues that economic freedom was an accidental result of political freedom. Friedman has a similarly difficulty clarifying the relationship between these two phenomena. He originally contended that “economic freedom is...an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom,” (Friedman 2002, 8), thus agreeing with Hayek’s first formulation. However, in his 2002 preface, he acknowledges that this relationship is not so straightforward: “political freedom, desirable though it may be, is not a necessary condition for economic and civil freedom” (*ibid.* ix). More pointedly still, “political freedom, which under some circumstances promotes economic and civil freedom...under others, inhibits economic and civil freedom” (*ibid.* x). For example, when Chileans democratically elected a socialist president, Salvador Allende, this would for Friedman be a case in which political freedom inhibited “economic freedom,” as he understands it. Thus, they both see democracy as in some way linked with freedom and worthy of support, but they struggle to formulate exactly how this relationship works and hesitate to endorse political freedom as of primary importance.

Moreover, at other points in their texts, they are both deeply suspicious of democracy and the political sphere, more broadly. For Friedman (2002, 15):

The characteristic feature of action through political channels is that it tends to require or enforce substantial conformity. The great advantage of the market, on

the other hand, is that it permits wide diversity. It is, in political terms, a system of proportional representation. Each man can vote, as it were, for the color of tie he wants and get it; he does not have to see what color the majority wants and then, if he is in the minority, submit.

Thus, Friedman's principle objection is that democratic politics, in contrast to markets, requires two social evils: coercion and conformity.

Hayek's basic libertarian commitments lead him to oppose majoritarian rule because it would necessarily involve forcing a minority against their will. The "fashionable concentration on democracy...is largely responsible for the misleading and unfounded belief that, so long as the ultimate source of power is the will of the majority, the power cannot be arbitrary" (Hayek 2007, 110). As Harvey (2005, 25) succinctly puts it:

The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideas of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental...These values, they held, were threatened not only by fascism, dictatorships, and communism, but by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgments for those of individuals free to choose.

In short, these libertarian theorists saw "democracy" as a threat to individual liberty, as a form of majoritarian coercion. If democracy is just another collectivist system whereby individuals must submit to a Rousseauian "general will" enforced by a centralized state apparatus, then Hayek and Friedman would be right to see democratic politics as in tension with freedom. However, democracy need not be equated with state-based majority rule. In large part, the aim of the subsequent chapters of the dissertation is to elaborate one way we might conceptualize and practice democracy that bears little resemblance to state-based majority rule. I will argue that a democracy decoupled from the state and detached from an ideal of majority rule is actually the correct politics for thinkers committed to individual liberty. I will, in other words, articulate a "freedom-centered" account of democracy – one that is not committed to state sovereignty, but instead to the dispersion and decentralization of power throughout society.

For the time being, however, I want to focus on a preliminary problem: If politics – even democratic politics – is fundamentally coercive and centralizing, then to be free is to be free from politics. Because they are suspicious of even democratic politics, both Hayek and Friedman think about freedom as private and non-political. As Arendt (2000, 443) puts it in her essay “What is Freedom?”:

The rise of totalitarianism, its claim of having subordinated all spheres of life to the demands of politics...makes us doubt not only the coincidence of politics and freedom but their very compatibility. We are inclined to believe that freedom begins where politics ends...Was not the liberal credo, ‘The less politics the more freedom,’ right after all? Is it not true that the smaller the space occupied by the political, the larger the domain left to freedom?

In the next section, I aim to show, with Arendt, why the answer to these questions is a definitive “no,” that libertarian thinkers – those committed to freedom above all else – ought to view freedom as fundamentally a political phenomenon and that democracy (albeit not a statist, majoritarian democracy) is crucial for freedom to flourish.

#### **IV. Why Freedom Cannot Mean an A(nti-)Political Self-Sovereignty**

Libertarianism is often associated with two interrelated viewpoints: that government – even democratic government – will be necessarily coercive and that, as a result, freedom is to be found in the private sphere, outside the reach of politics. In popular culture in the U.S., for example within the Tea Party movement, we can see this tendency as a desire to build walls, real or metaphorical. Thus, the Tea Party’s fixation on illegal immigration can be seen as an effort to seal off the nation to ensure the sovereignty of native-born people over “their” territory. Such a view is but another demonstration of how so-called “libertarianism” in the United States is aimed not at reducing state power, but rather, at amplifying and redirecting state power. We see it also in the Tea Party’s passion for gun rights, in the sense that guns provide us the ability to remain sovereign over our homes, to protect and defend ourselves. While I think that gun rights are

compatible with anti-authoritarianism in a way that militarized borders are not, they also demonstrates the way that many “libertarians” understand freedom: freedom occurs on my land, on my property, in my house. The task of the believer in freedom is to defend these private sanctuaries from the impositions of a distant government and the meddling of democratic politics.

This popular view finds roots within much liberal and libertarian philosophy, as well. If the Tea Party seeks to build real walls around the nation’s borders and around one’s home, Lomasky (1987, 54) aims to build metaphorical walls through an understanding of rights as form of sovereignty: “By establishing boundaries that others must not transgress, [rights] accord to each rights holder a measure of sovereignty over his own life” (Lomasky 1987, 54). Notably, Mill (2002, 14) contends that “the appropriate region of human liberty” is, in the first instance, the “inward domain of consciousness” or “liberty of thought” and, in the second instance, the “liberty of tastes and pursuits.” As Arendt explains, this “inner freedom,” understood as the “inward space in which men may escape from external coercion and *feel* free” constitutes a flight from politics. Freedom becomes a highly individualistic and apolitical, if not anti-political undertaking. Given that Friedman, Hayek and libertarians more generally are committed to individualism, such a conclusion is not surprising. It is worth noting, though, that Hayek (2007, 68) is careful to distinguish this commitment to individualism from a commitment to “egotism and selfishness” – vices that Ayn Rand, for instance in her (1964) *The Virtue of Selfishness*, elevates to the status of virtues. For Hayek (*ibid.*, 102), individualism

...does not assume, as is often asserted, that man is egoistic or selfish or ought to be. It merely starts from the indisputable fact that the limits of our powers of imagination make it impossible to include in our scale of values more than a sector of the needs of a whole society.

In contrast to Rand's crude egotism, Hayekian individualism is committed to "respect for the individual man *qua* man, that is, the recognition of his own views and tastes as supreme in his own sphere, however narrowly that may be circumscribed, and the belief that it is desirable that men should develop their own individual gifts and bents" (*ibid.* 68).

Let me be clear: I am *not* arguing that private freedom, such as that described by Lomasky, Mill, and Hayek, is bad, frivolous or unimportant. Private freedom – the ability to have some space separate from others (physically and metaphorically), to develop one's own talents and tastes, and to enjoy space from common undertakings and political matters – is, in my view, a critical component of any free society. My claim is, rather, that to define freedom this way is to unnecessarily restrict its domain and to, frankly, diminish individuals' capacity for freedom by denying its social outlets and collective implications. Free people often, though by no means always, use their freedom in public and political ways: they engage in collective undertakings aimed at creating public spaces and providing public goods. Thinking about freedom as *only* a place to escape politics, to escape democracy, fails to capture the reality that freedom is also about acting with others and exercising collective power. Thus, libertarians seeking to justify neoliberal states run into paradoxes that are symptomatic of their narrowed conception of freedom. As Harvey (2005, 69) astutely points out:

While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions) as opposed to weak voluntary associations (like charitable organization)...Faced with social movements that seek collective interventions, therefore, the neoliberal state is itself forced to intervene, sometimes repressively, thus denying the very freedoms it is supposed to uphold.

Consider, for example, Friedman's support of Pinochet's regime and the reasons Friedman updated *Capitalism and Freedom* to suggest that political freedom actually might be a barrier to economic and civil freedom (as he understands those terms). Friedman can accept Pinochet

because he values, to paraphrase the Eduardo Galleano quote from above, the freedom of prices (a dimension of “private” freedom) over the freedom of people to shape their political institutions as they see fit (a dimension of “public” freedom). And *it is precisely this denial* – that free people, despite the significant barriers to collective action, often choose to mobilize together – *that impedes libertarian thinking* about the possibilities of freedom through politics – that, in other words, prevents many “libertarians” from seeing the possibilities of *democratic freedom*.

Prior to developing an account of democratic freedom as non-sovereign self-determination, however, allow me to explore some of the additional problems with theorizing freedom as libertarians often do, as *exclusively* a question as to whether one has control over her “own sphere” – that is, has a domain over which she is sovereign or in full control. Libertarians often begin, whether implicitly or explicitly, from the premise of self-sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> Lomasky (1987, 11) is explicit:

[A]ffirmations of basic rights spring from a commitment to the *value of the individual*...[T]he core of this notion is that each person possesses kind of sovereignty over his own life and that such sovereignty entails that he be accorded a zone of protected activity within which he is to be free from encroachment by others.

From the premise of self-sovereignty, libertarian thinkers argue that freedom is best understood as non-interference (or “freedom from encroachment,” as Lomasky puts it) and ultimately adopt a model of self-determination as sovereign independence. I will first raise problems with the premise of self-sovereignty, and then articulate some issues with freedom as non-interference and self-determination as independence. My aim is to suggest that one can begin from “a commitment to the *value of the individual*,” without being committed to the *sovereignty of the*

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Nozick, in his classic (1974) *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, adopts a Lockean framework that begins from a premise of owning property in oneself. This, in turn, leads to language of self-ownership, rather than self-sovereignty, though I think the basic assumptions and implications are the same.

*individual*. This does not mean abandoning or even downplaying individual liberty, but rather recasting it in non-sovereign terms.

The concept of self-sovereignty has come under attack from a variety of directions. Its ontological assumptions about fully-formed, independent selves have been challenged by communitarians such as Sandel (1996), who contend that subjects are constituted through their relationships and entanglements in the world – that there is, in short, no “unencumbered self.”<sup>4</sup> Feminists have rightly pointed out that the assumption that independence or self-sufficiency is necessary of freedom is a “dangerous fiction” because it provided a justification for freeing some (i.e. property-owning, white men) from menial tasks such that they had time for politics and business and condemning others (such as slaves and women) as dependents unworthy or incapable of experiencing freedom (Young 2007, 46).

The implications of the human condition of plurality on the human desire for freedom are, of course, manifold. For example, Arendt (1958, 232 – 33) maintains that individual human actions have consequences that the actor could not possibly control and, thus, cannot be said to be sovereign, even over their own actions.

[M]en never have been and never will be able to undo or even control reliably any of the processes they start through action...And this incapacity to undo what has been done is matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed...The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that the action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end.

As such, “...the deed, once done has effects beyond the doer’s control” (Zerilli 2005, 14). Thus, paradoxically, the human capacity for free action “seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he

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<sup>4</sup> Sandel (1996, 12) uses the language of sovereignty to identify the ideal of an independent, unencumbered person: “the liberal self is installed as sovereign.”

has done” (Arendt 1958, 233 – 34). In this case, “perfect liberty” – by which Arendt means self-sovereignty – is a fallacious ideal because we cannot actually control the effects of our actions. Such a story raises complicated questions about the possibilities of and limitations on human agency.

Here I focus on two primary objections to the concept of self-sovereignty. First, it is impossible. Second, it is self-defeating. Arendt’s arguments above already hint at the impossibility of being sovereign: if the reverberations of our actions ultimately spin so far out of our control that we are at once “doer” and “sufferer” of our own actions, then sovereignty, even over oneself, is a dangerous myth. Beyond the Arendtian insight, however, the basic economic concepts of interdependence and externalities – both of which Hayek and Friedman appreciate – provide other, simpler reasons that self-sovereignty is an illusion. First, let me take on the reasons that, I think, even Hayek and Friedman would have to see self-sovereignty as an impossibility.

At times, as we might expect, Friedman conceptualizes the basis of freedom as self-sovereignty. As an example, consider Friedman’s (2002, 13) model of society:

In its simplest form, society consists of a number of independent households – a collection of Robinson Crusoes, as it were. Each household uses the resources it controls to produce goods and services that it exchanges for goods and services produced by other households, on terms mutually acceptable to the two parties to the bargain... Since the household always has the alternative of producing directly for itself, it need not enter into any exchange unless it benefits from it.

Accordingly, the basis for free exchange is because the individual “household always has the alternative of producing directly for itself.” Such a claim is egregiously untrue given a) the degree of complexity in our modern economies and b) the fact that there is no more frontier on which to produce directly – points Friedman is certainly aware of. On the very same page as Friedman’s previous quote, he notes:



Even in relatively backward societies, extensive division of labor and specialization of function is required to make effective use of available resources. In advanced societies, the scale on which coordination is needed, to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by modern science and technology, is enormously greater. Literally millions of people are involved in providing one another with their daily bread, let alone with their yearly automobiles (*ibid.* 12 – 13).

These two statements are in clear contradiction to each other: on the one hand freedom requires at least the option of “producing directly” for one’s self (otherwise we might be forced to accept economic exchanges we otherwise would not) and, on the other hand, we rely on “literally millions of people” to provide us even our most basic needs – “our daily bread,” in Friedman’s terms. Thus, Friedman is well aware that interdependency is fact. Being a fully independent or sovereign individual is impossible because we do not live (and except in rare circumstances have not lived) as isolated self-sufficient individuals or households. Thus, it makes little sense to ground a theory of freedom on the assumption that we are in fact sovereign and self-sufficient selves. We are fundamentally social and fundamentally dependent on other people economically, even when we are fully formed adults. This says nothing about the extensive dependency all of us have on others during our childhood and the equally extensive dependency that many of us will experience in our last years of life.

This is not all, however. As Arendt suggests self-sovereignty is not only impossible, it is self defeating.

If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the world” (Arendt 1958, 234).

And, what is more, even if one were to try to actualize freedom of the will and “overcome the consequences of plurality...the result would be not so much sovereign domination of one’s self as arbitrary domination of all others” (*ibid.*). This then brings us to the second problem with self-

sovereignty. If one man can become sovereign, the result is the domination of others. To put this more modestly, the more sovereign an individual is – the greater freedom they have to do what they want within their “own sphere” – the less sovereign are people in neighboring and overlapping spheres. If I am fully sovereign over my apartment I can play music as loud as I want at anytime of the day. In doing so, I infringe on the sovereignty of neighboring apartments to choose the decibel level they prefer. If I am fully sovereign over my land I can destroy its natural resources – by, for example, clear-cutting the trees or dumping toxic waste – both actions whose effects are likely to extend into neighboring land, diminishing the other owners’ sovereignty. Friedman acknowledges that the way property rights are defined – their extensiveness and their boundaries, for example – are critical for questions of human freedom.

The notion of property...has become so much a part of us that we tend to take it for granted, and fail to recognize the extent to which just what constitutes property and what rights the ownership of property confers are complex social creations rather than self-evident propositions. Does my title to land, for example, and my freedom to use my property as I wish, permit me to deny to someone else the right to fly over my land in his airplane? Or does his right to use his airplane take precedence? Or does this depend on how high he flies? Or how much noise he makes? Does voluntary exchange require that he pay me for the privilege of flying over my land? Or that I must pay him to refrain from flying over it (Friedman 2002, 26 – 27)?

Yet, while acknowledging these complexities, he does not delve into them in order to develop a coherent account of how sovereign control over one’s property (to take one element of freedom as self-sovereignty) is compatible for multiple people, simultaneously, in society. Instead, he leaves the issue to the side, assuming that his overall account of freedom is compelling in the absence of any persuasive answer to the questions he raises. It is not.

This is, in essence, the problem of externalities. Externalities refer to costs or benefits of an economic transaction that are borne by an agent who was not party to the transaction. A negative externality could be pollution or noise. A positive externality could be the lower rates

of infections due to one family's decision to immunize their children. I still remember taking micro-economics and environmental economics as an undergraduate. The professor would invariably raise the issue of externalities – for, if externalities occur, market failure results, meaning that markets will produce non-optimal outcomes. However, as quickly as they were mentioned we had moved on, back to the magical world of perfect competition, perfect information and perfect prices (much as Friedman acknowledges but does not dwell on the crucial question of how property rights are defined). Externalities were treated as an aberration, a rare occurrence: certainly they are problematic if and when they do occur, but the assumption was that this would not happen often. Rather than operating on the assumption that externalities are rare, the more accurate assumption seems to me that externalities occur with nearly all economic transactions. What goods do we buy that have not involved costs externalized onto other, perhaps far flung, people or property? If externalities are pervasive, then one person's freedom to do as they like in their "own sphere" will entail a diminished control for others over their "own sphere." None of this is to say that there is no normative weight to enabling people some measure of control over their "own sphere," but it is to suggest two points, which limit the appeal of defining freedom in such terms: 1) One's "own sphere" may actually be quite narrow and thus, Mill's harm principle (to take but one example) may be less an argument for extensive individual freedom and more a justification for extensive state intervention, for if negative externalities are pervasive, harm is also pervasive. 2) Self-sovereignty is, or at least can be, a zero-sum game: the more sovereign I am, the less sovereign you are; the more absolute my control over my property, the less extensive your control over your property. To put this differently, for the advocate of human freedom (rather than the crude egoist), freedom as self-

sovereignty is a self-defeating principle, that results in “not so much sovereign domination of one’s self as arbitrary domination of all others...” (Arendt 1985, 234).

If there are indeed manifold problems with thinking of freedom in terms of self-sovereignty, then what conception of freedom might libertarians draw upon? I want to suggest that libertarianism neither requires nor entails that one adopt a private view of freedom or withdraw from the political realm. Freedom may be less about walling oneself off from others, and instead might require engagement, negotiation and even action with others. As we will see, this opens the door to seeing freedom and democracy to be compatible concepts, providing a link between the freedom of the individual and the politics of the collective. In the following section, using work by Pettit and Young, I show how we can move beyond a view of freedom as non-interference and self-determination as independence (the views implied by the starting premise of self-sovereignty), and instead develop an account of freedom as non-domination and non-sovereign or relational self-determination.

## **V. An Alternative Conception of Freedom**

Based on a view of self-sovereignty, “libertarians” generally adopt a view as freedom as non-interference. According to Pettit (2001, 132), the ideal of freedom as non-interference “takes interference to the paradigmatic or unique form of interpersonal inhibition on freedom and holds freedom primarily requires the reduction of such interference.” Interference occurs when a person or group of people “intentionally or quasi-intentionally worsen [an]other’s choice by means of one of the following initiatives: removing an option, raising the costs attached to an option; or denying the person knowledge of the options available or the associated costs” (*ibid.*). So, for example, according to Friedman (2002, 15) “[p]olitical freedom means the absence of coercion of a man by his fellow men.”

Pettit identifies two main problems with freedom as non-interference. First, it does not distinguish between what he calls “friendly coercion” and “hostile coercion.” Some forms of coercion that follow the “avowable interests of the interferee” (Pettit 2001, 134) are compatible with freedom, such as when the interferee “gives another person the right to coerce them at a certain point to do something, fearing that at that point they will lose sight of their own best interests” (*ibid.* 75 – 76). If freedom is simply non-interference, then we lose the ability to distinguish freedom-compatible interference from freedom-constraining interference. Second, freedom can be violated even if interference does not occur. Freedom can be severely challenged by agents that have the capacity to interfere but do not actually interfere, or have power over you but little need to exercise that power “so long as they can depend on you to make efforts to keep them sweet, tailoring your actions to their expected wishes, and staying out of their way if you do not” (*ibid.* 137). Consider, for example the relationship between a child and an abusive parent, or between an employee and a boss, or a citizen and a cop.

In all of these cases someone lives at the mercy of others. That person is dominated by those others in the sense that even if the others don’t interfere in his or her life, they have an arbitrary power of doing so: there are few restraints or costs to inhibit them. If the dominated person escapes ill treatment, that is by the grace or favour of the powerful. The price of liberty in such a world is not eternal vigilance but eternal discretion (*ibid.*).

While self-censorship and self-inhibition are actions that may prevent interference, they are not the actions that ought to be identified with freedom.

Moreover, in Young’s (2007) essay “Two Concepts of Self-Determination” she links the view of freedom as non-interference to a view of self-determination as independence. The first concept of self-determination “equates it with sovereign independence, where the self-determining entity claims a right of nonintervention and noninterference” (*ibid.* 40). In this view, freedom requires that an agent have complete control over her jurisdiction and disallows

any outside actors from interfering within that sphere. Such a view of freedom as independent sovereignty could be applied to the individual person having full control within that person's private sphere or a nation-state having full control within its territorial boundaries. "The ideal of self-determination, on this view, consists in an agent's being left alone to conduct his or her affairs over his or her own independent sphere" (*ibid.* 46). As I have already shown above and will not dwell on again here, claims of sovereignty run into a litany of problems and ultimately collapse because of the inherent problems in claiming a fully independent sphere. As such, Young develops an alternative account of self-determination, one that is rooted in Pettit's account of freedom as non-domination.

If we begin from the assumption that it is not possible to be sovereign over oneself – if we take seriously the human condition of plurality in Arendt's framework, or the extent to which we are "encumbered" in the communitarian's sense, or the prevalence of interdependency and externalities in the economist's sense – what are the implications for the libertarian's commitment to human freedom? My claim is that libertarians (and anti-authoritarians more generally) should adopt the framework of freedom and self-determination proposed by Pettit and Young: freedom as non-domination and self-determination as relational. Allow me to briefly explain each of these ideas.

Rather than identifying freedom with non-interference, Young (2007, 48) argues that freedom should be understood as non-domination.

An agent dominates another when he or she has power over that other and is thus able to interfere with the other *arbitrarily*. Interference is arbitrary when it is chosen or rejected without consideration of the interest or opinions of those affected. An agent may dominate another, however, without every interfering with that person. Domination consists in standing in a set of relations which makes an agent *able* to interfere arbitrarily with the actions of others.

Freedom on this view is not the same as non-interference for two reasons. First, a person may be unfree if they are never actually interfered with and it is the power to interfere, rather than the interference itself that presents the primary normative problem. Second, a free person may experience interference; in other words, not all interference is a source of unfreedom.

Thus when a person has a personal or institutional power that makes him or her able to interfere with my action arbitrarily, I am not free, even if in fact the dominating agent has not directly interfered with my actions. Conversely, a person whose actions are interfered with for the sake of reducing or eliminating such relations of domination is not unfree...It is appropriate for governing agents to interfere in actions in order to promote institutions that minimize domination. Interference is not arbitrary if its purpose is to minimize domination, and if it is done in a way that takes the interests and voices of affected persons into account (*ibid.*).

It is worth pointing out an inconsistency between two formulations of “arbitrariness” in the above definitions. In the first paragraph, interference is arbitrary if it does not take into “consideration” the “interest and opinions of those affected.” In the second paragraph, interference is arbitrary if it is not done for the “the sake of reducing or eliminating...relations of domination.” These are two very different principles. On the one hand, the first formulation is exceptionally weak protection against interference: all an interfering agent has to do is “consider” the effects of the interference on the affected parties. I can certainly consider a person’s interests and still act against them. On the other hand, it conflicts with the second formulation, since presumably many people who enjoy positions of domination would strongly object to measures that reduce their position of domination. Such interference seems clearly to be against that person’s interests, since presumably they would prefer to maintain their position of domination, or, in Hayek’s (2007, 72) words, their “antisocial privileges.” For these reasons, I think the second formulation is much clearer: interference is not arbitrary and thus compatible

with freedom, when the interference is done to reduce or eliminate relationships of domination, so long as the dominating party's interest and voice are still taken into account.

As Pettit (2001, 141) suggests, however...

...There is a paradox lurking here...No one can be given [freedom] as a gift from others who are powerful enough to be able to withhold it. Let some others have that sort of power and nothing they do can effectively transfer such control. The only way for a person to enjoy discursive control is to command it: to be powerful enough in relation to others for the denial of such control...to be impossible or excessively costly for others.

In other words, Pettit sees that non-dominating relationships cannot be *given* by the dominating agent for the simple reason that if the dominating agent is powerful enough to “give” freedom from someone, they are powerful enough to take it away. Power inequalities between people cannot be resolved by the powerful imposing restrictions on themselves or affording rights to the less powerful, for what is to stop the powerful from willy-nilly removing the restrictions or ignoring the rights? This is an absolutely crucial insight, one that turns out to be central to the anti-authoritarian perspective presented in the remainder of the dissertation. In the next chapter, I will explore the anti-authoritarian analysis of power and uncover why anti-authoritarians are much less sanguine about checks on state power than are liberals and, more importantly, see how anti-authoritarian theorists seek to organize society in ways that mobilize power against its centralization. In short, I will develop an account of “centrifugal power” as a mechanism for preventing the rise of dominating relationships. Then, in the following chapter, I will more directly respond to the paradox that Pettit identifies above: freedom as non-domination is not something that can be given, it must be taken. I will argue that the anarchist practice of direct action exemplifies this dynamic: to undo domination, the dominated must literally change the “distribution” of power in society through actions that amplify and assert their power.



For now, let me focus on the task at hand: Freedom as non-domination should be appealing to libertarians because it seems to overcome freedom as non-interference's basic problems. It does not make problematic (indeed, impossible) ontological assumptions about independence, but instead is compatible with humans as entangled and interdependent beings. It does not justify the oppressive social relationships necessary to sustain an illusion of independence, nor does it condemn those who are clearly dependent to a condition of being incapable or unworthy of freedom. Finally, it avoids the problem that a view of freedom based on self-sovereignty is ultimately self-defeating principle, for all save the sovereign (or the egoist).

Whereas freedom as non-interference implies a model of self-determination as independence, freedom as non-domination implies a model of self-determination as relational. While Young argues that the application of this second concept of self-determination can be extended from individuals to collectives or peoples, as a way of interpreting the claims indigenous people make for self-determination, I would like to take this argument in a somewhat different direction. The main implication that I wish to draw from Pettit and Young's freedom as non-domination is that that individual self-determination is a relational concept that requires engagements with others. In Young's (2007, 40) words: "To ensure nondomination, their relations must be regulated both by institutions in which they all participate and by ongoing negotiations among them."<sup>5</sup> For individual freedom to be established and maintained, then, requires some kind of ongoing democratic institutions and/or practices. More precisely, an agent is self-determining only if the relations in which they stand to others are not characterized by domination. Freedom, on this view, is characterized not so much by sovereign independence, but by egalitarian interdependence. Individual liberty is less focused on walling oneself off from

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<sup>5</sup> Young (2007), 40.

relationships to other people, and more about ensuring that the relationships we inevitably have with others are non-dominating.

## **VI. Libertarian or Anti-Authoritarian Democracy**

Libertarian theorists, such as Friedman and Hayek, begin from an understanding of freedom that leads them to adopt an anti-democratic, individualistic politics. I hope to have shown why their conceptualization of freedom is problematic and, in doing so, to open the door to an alternative account of freedom and self-determination, one that seems to entail not a withdrawal from politics, but engagement with politics. Non-domination is a fully relational concept of freedom (i.e. freedom is defined as a particular kind of relationship with other people) and these non-dominating relationships imply a very basic sort of democratic politics: ongoing negotiations between persons in the context of participatory institutions. As such, libertarians and anti-authoritarians more broadly should endorse a radically democratic politics, where democracy is understood as *a political organization characterized by non-domination*. Such a position can be endorsed while maintaining their justified skepticism toward statist, majoritarian forms of democracy. Non-domination links freedom and democracy together conceptually: a commitment to freedom implies a commitment to democracy, radically understood as condition in which *no person has enough power over another person that they are able to arbitrarily interfere with them*. Thus, when Hayek (2007, 60) says, “We know that we are fighting for freedom to shape our life according to our own ideas...” he invokes a principle of self-determination and, if my argument is correct, it is the relational concept of self-determination to which he should be committed. Not only does this view of freedom avoid the problems raised by concepts of self-sovereignty and independence, it is a richer concept of freedom. It is one thing to have the freedom to respond to conditions in the world that we have no control over, it is quite

another to have freedom to, in negotiation with others, actually shape the conditions of life themselves. As Brown (1995, 4) puts it, true freedom requires an ability to “generate futures together rather than [to simply] navigate or survive them.”

In much of this chapter, I aimed to upset some of the assumptions of libertarian thought in order to argue that some of their basic political commitments can be taken in a radically democratic rather than a neoliberal direction. The goal was then to, in Abensour’s (2011, 100) words, foster “an encounter between” democracy and the “libertarian spirit, each taking a step toward the other.” So far, as the astute reader will have noticed, I have been primarily asking the “libertarian spirit” to take a step toward democracy by reconceptualizing freedom such that it does not become a “conquering and predator autonomy” (*ibid.* 91). However, this is only one side of the equation and the second half of the dissertation will focus primarily on the other side of the equation: that of reframing democracy “to keep pace with the modern idea of liberty,” a move which requires that we take “full measure of the problem of the State” (*ibid.*).

By way of a conclusion, let me briefly present three key libertarian or anti-authoritarian insights that bear on the reframing of democracy. In other words, to be truly anti-authoritarian, what criteria must a democratic theory meet? What ways ought to democracy “step toward” the libertarian spirit? First, democracy must be disassociated from majority rule because doing so cannot help but result in coercion of political minorities and trample individual freedoms. Moreover, majoritarian democracy will necessarily run roughshod over people’s inherent diversity and plurality and enforce an artificial conformity. A libertarian conception of democracy must enable people to choose differently, to pursue different and even contradictory ends. Second, a libertarian account of democracy must avoid concentrations of power, including power centralized in a democratic state. An anti-authoritarian democratic politics does not seek

to legitimate the centralized power of the state, but rather to disperse that power, to create many nodes of non-sovereign political power throughout society. As suggested above, libertarian democracy is characterized by relationships of non-domination. I will radicalize this perspective in the next chapter by arguing, contra Pettit, that non-domination is in fundamental tension with the state, an entity with a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within society. Finally, a libertarian democracy will have to make better use of the spontaneous forces of free people to solve information and coordination problems. While libertarians generally focus on the role of economic markets, I will highlight the democratic anti-authoritarianism of political networks.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE INDIAN AGAINST LEVIATHAN: ANARCHIST ANTHROPOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVES TO SOVEREIGNTY AND CENTRALIZED POWER

*“Far from giving us the lackluster image of an inability to resolve the question of political power, [Indian] societies astonish us by the subtlety with which they have posed and settled the question. They had a very early premonition that power’s transcendence conceals a mortal risk for the group, that the principle of an authority which is external and the creator of its own legality is a challenge to culture itself. It is the intuition of this threat that determined the depth of their political philosophy.”*

– Pierre Clastres (1987, 44)

#### **Introduction: Non-Domination as an Anti-Statist Principle**

The view of freedom as non-domination advanced in the previous chapter is a radical concept – more radical, indeed, than its defenders often recognize. Recall that “domination consists in standing in a set of relations which makes an agent *able* to interfere arbitrarily with the actions of others” (Young 2007, 48). To pit freedom against domination and to be opposed to domination entails hostility toward any hierarchies that enable the more powerful to arbitrarily interfere with the lives of the less powerful. According to this view, then, freedom is incompatible with the sort of sharp power inequalities that characterize much of our world today: the power of the U.S. military in the Middle East, the power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the power of the drug cartels in Mexico, the power of finance capital the world over, the power of bosses in the workplaces, the power of border patrol agents over migrants, the power of police over citizens. To advocate for freedom as non-domination entails hostility toward these (and other) centers of concentrated power and a commitment to more equitable power relations throughout society. If centralized power fosters domination, dispersed power is the antidote.

However, since the ideal of freedom as non-domination has primarily been advanced within the republican tradition – a political perspective that has long countenanced certain forms

of the state – its advocates have not taken seriously the extent to which non-domination is in tension with state power. In short, I contend that freedom as non-domination is, fundamentally, an anti-statist concept. Though a state is by no means the only entity that might be able to interfere arbitrarily with the actions of others, it is undeniably one such entity. And, the distinctive feature of the state – that it alone has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence<sup>6</sup> within society – makes it particularly problematic from the perspective of freedom as non-domination. How does such an entity *not* run the risk of becoming *a* source, if not *the* source, of domination? This chapter, then, connects the first defining characteristic of libertarian/anti-authoritarian thought – commitment to individual *freedom* – with the second defining characteristic of such a perspective – skepticism of and opposition toward centralized *power*, including most notably the state. Just as the first chapter articulates an account of freedom that is oriented toward an egalitarian and democratic politics (rather than an individualist and capitalist politics), this chapter seeks to develop an account of power that can be useful to radically democratic theory and practice.

While Pettit usefully sets up the idea of freedom as non-domination, which I believe clarifies the link between individual freedom and opposition to centralized power, he does not follow through on the anti-statist implications of freedom as non-domination. Indeed, he does not even conceive of the question of political freedom as separable from the state:

Suppose we think of freedom as something *that the state ought to advance* among its members or citizens....And suppose that we identify the political ideal of freedom with non-domination. Where will that lead us in political theory: that is, in the theory of what *the state ought to be and do* (Pettit 2001, 152; emphasis added).

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<sup>6</sup> In this chapter I want to understand violence as one form or manifestation of power. This does not mean there that violence is synonymous with power, nor does it imply a moral equivalency between all forms of power. I think of these concepts as related, however, and I certainly think that the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in society is a critically important form of power that theorists of non-domination need to address.

In this framing, there is literally no way to think of political freedom except through the lens of the state: political freedom is conceptualized as something that the state promotes and thus, freedom as non-domination cannot have an anti-statist trajectory. Even more problematically, the end of the last quote identifies the sole subject of political theory as the state, a move with many implications, one of which further reduces possibilities for thinking about political freedom outside of the state. Simply put, Pettit avoids the notion that non-domination entails opposition to the state by framing the question in such a way so as to obliterate the very possibility that freedom is to be gained by people acting in opposition to the state rather than by people acting through or with the state.

While I think it is noteworthy how Pettit frames this issue so as to occlude the possibility that non-domination is an anti-statist principle, let me briefly explain what I take to be his more principled argument for the state. He identifies “two kinds of power in any social world...First, there is the *imperium* of the state, or public power. And second there is the *dominium* or private power of interference” (*ibid.* 152).<sup>7</sup> State power, on Pettit’s account, is necessary to counter private power, to check forms of domination whenever they appear: “the republican state will be charged with putting...restrictions on private power” (*ibid.*). State power, albeit in a limited form, is useful for promoting freedom as non-domination by checking private power.<sup>8</sup> In short, *imperium* is necessary to prevent *dominium*. The state can be freedom-promoting to the extent that it uses its power to prevent, check and/or undo relations of domination. Pettit maintains that “[t]o the extent that state action is not arbitrary” – to the extent that it counters relationships of

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<sup>7</sup> This formulation, useful though it is, is not entirely accurate. As will become clear later in this chapter, not all social worlds have these two forms of power, as many so-called primitive societies did not have state power, which is *not* to say that their societies are not characterized by political power.

<sup>8</sup> As I suggested in the previous chapter, it is this realization that neoliberals (masquerading as libertarians) crucially miss.

domination – “it does not represent an assault...” on people’s freedom (*ibid.* 139). However, he acknowledges that:

In making these points about the possibility of state action being non-arbitrary and reinforcing people in their possession [of freedom], I am in danger of seeming an naïve idealist. Let me put the balance right, then, by immediately conceding that in actual states there is every likelihood that political power will be arbitrary in considerable measure...The only point I want to make is that despite this melancholy *reality* – and despite the consequent ideal of minimizing state power – there is still an ideal in view here and it should keep us alert to the possibility of improving the constitution of the state rather than just despairing of it (*ibid.* 140; emphasis added).

Now, Pettit’s effort is clearly an attempt to specify an ideal by which we can measure actual institutions. This is no doubt a worthy project, but one that leads in a very different direction than if he were instead to dwell a bit more on the “melancholy reality” of how actual states work. If Pettit is right, that “in actual states there is every likelihood that political power will be arbitrary in considerable measure” then it is (also) worthwhile to consider whether non-domination may be fruitfully conceived outside the parameters of the state. In contrast to Pettit, however, I will propose not “despairing” about the sovereign state, but presenting an alternative to it.

The intellectual contortions that are required to make non-domination compatible with the state – which, in effect, must entail a claim that while concentrated power is the fundamental threat to freedom the highly concentrated power of the state is acceptable – only make sense if:

a) the power of the state can be safely limited or constrained by institutions such as rights, divided government, and the rule of law, and/or b) there is no alternative to or way of avoiding a state, so even if taming the state is fraught enterprise we have no choice but to do our best and live with it. In my view, both of these claims are mistaken and my aim in this chapter is to explain why.



Accordingly, I will advance two central arguments in this chapter. First, attempts to limit or constrain the state do not change the nature of sovereignty: a non-sovereign state is not possible. While checks on the state, such as rights, are by no means trivial, they do not change the underlying nature of state sovereignty. To return to the quote in the epigraph, the state's power is ultimately "external [to the community over which it rules] and the creator of its own legality." To be sovereign is to have the final word and to possess the means of violence to enforce that word. Moreover, to be sovereign is to be able to make exceptions to the rules, if not to change them outright. Such an entity in society is fundamentally at odds with freedom as non-domination. Second, I will show that there is an alternative to state sovereignty and centralized power. While the statist organization of power seeks to concentrate or unify society's capacities for violence into a single entity (the state) in order to quash acts of violence by others in society, I will argue that this is neither a necessary nor desirable move, at least from the perspective of freedom as non-domination. To put this in Pettit's terms, I contend that it is possible to check concentrated forms of private power (*dominium*) without reliance on state power (*imperium*) – that is, without creating an even more concentrated center of power and, thus, opening the door to an even more serious form of domination. To develop this alternative, I turn to the field of anarchist anthropology. Anarchist anthropology refers to an approach within political anthropology that specifically studies how non-state societies both resist state incorporation and organize themselves without recourse to the state-form. Although nonstate societies were indeed permeated by political power, this fact did not lead inexorably to the centralization of power in the state-form, but instead fostered power's decentralization. Indeed, power was organized in ways that prevented the rise of the state, and the monopolization of power it entails.

As I make these two arguments, I will also develop two opposing logics of power. By power, I mean the ability to define values, structure situations, influence the actions of others, and create the outcomes one prefers. I thus mean to use the word power broadly, as the capacity to shape the world. In this sense, I view power as a fact of human existence and an essential component of all societies. It is neither inherently good, nor bad. That said, different organizations or logics of power can most certainly be good or bad from the anti-authoritarian perspective. The first logic I to call *centripetal power*. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, centripetal means “moving toward a center” or “acting in a direction toward a center.” Centripetal power then is a form or logic that tends toward the centralization of power. An act of power that results in a center developing greater power would be an instance of centripetal power. It is the logic of centralization, monopolization and unification. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is perhaps the central work in political theory that articulates and defends centripetal power. Thus, in section I, I briefly elucidate the Hobbes’ defense of an absolute state – a “LEVIATHAN...*Mortal God*...[or] SOVEREIGN,” in Hobbes’ (1994, XVII 13) words – as the prototypical example of centripetal logic. While the language of *Leviathan* and sovereignty has clearly fallen out of favor today among republican and liberal theorists alike, I will seek to show in section II, that his centripetal thinking and the argument for sovereignty that follows from it, is generally assumed by and central to republican and liberal theory. In section III, I argue that republicanism and liberalism seek to constrain and limit the *Leviathan* through enshrined rights and the rule of law and that, as desirable as these innovations are, they do not fundamentally undercut sovereignty or solve the problems that sovereignty raises for freedom.

The second logic I would like to present is *centrifugal power*. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, centrifugal means “moving away from the center” or “acting in a direction

away from the center.” An act of power in which the center is deprived of power and/or that results in power being spread away from the center would be an instance of centrifugal power. It is a logic of decentralization, dispersion and multiplicity. To my mind, insights from anarchist anthropology are most helpful in elaborating this idea. In section IV, I argue that there is an alternative to sovereignty and, in fact, there is a long history of people choosing to avoid state incorporation. In section V, I argue that not only have such communities evaded and resisted state incursions, but that the politics – the organization of power within the community itself – is designed precisely to prevent a state from arising from within. In short, I show that there is such a thing as a non-state society and explain, briefly how such societies function. In section VI, I show that the logic of violence and war in primitive societies functions in precisely the opposite way as violence and war in statist societies. While states depend on a monopolization of legitimate violence and use war as a means to foster centralization, primitive societies depend on the dispersal of the capacity for violence and use war as a means to decentralize their populations and their power. Throughout the chapter, I characterize this distinction between *centrifugal* non-statist power and *centripetal* statist power as a conflict between the “Indian,” on the one hand, and the “Leviathan,” on the other.<sup>9</sup>

A final note: Whereas the concept of self-sovereignty came under attack in the preceding chapter, here I turn my attention to the concept of state sovereignty. Of course, these two notions of sovereignty are connected and, moreover, the connection between the two reinforces why self-sovereignty is not a viable basis for individual freedom. As James Martel (2007, 104) explains:

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<sup>9</sup> Though I use terms such as “Indian,” “primitive” and “savage” to characterize the politics, or logic of power, that permeates non-state societies, I use these non-politically correct (and, frankly, inaccurate) terms intentionally as a way of mocking the normal assumption that such societies are backward (politically, economically, and culturally) and that we have nothing to learn from them. On the contrary, I aim to suggest that our contemporary understanding of power has much to learn from these “primitive” societies. Finally, while the term “non-state society” glosses over a vast diversity that exists between these societies, I simply aim to articulate an archetype that can stand in useful contrast to statist societies (which also, of course, exhibit huge differences).

[F]or Arendt, Hobbes is one of the principal authors of modern notions of sovereignty, which for Arendt is characterized by the equivalency of freedom with free will – or *liberum arbitrium* (roughly the idea that ‘I can decide what I want...without reference to anything or anyone else’). Such a conceit becomes a basis for government (and since, we can’t all do this, obviously, it becomes the means for some few to foist their whims on the rest of us).

Self-sovereignty leads to state sovereignty, the result of which is, paradoxically, the repression of self-sovereignty for all but the few who rule. Though I will argue in this chapter from a perspective quite distinct from Arendt’s, I hope to arrive at broadly similar conclusion: that “[i]f men (*sic*) wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty [we] must renounce” (Arendt 2000, 455). Beyond that, if a politics of freedom and non-sovereignty is our goal, it is precisely centrifugal power we must claim. As such, by the end of this chapter I hope to have presented an initial account of centrifugal power. In subsequent chapters I will more fully discuss the implications of this concept for anti-authoritarian democracy, with a specific focus on how the practices of direct action and networked organization are attempts to mobilize centrifugal power in (and make it relevant to) the world today.

### **I. Leviathan Against the Indian: Hobbes’ Centripetal Argument for Sovereignty**

On the Hobbesian view, an absolute state – a Leviathan – is a precondition for any stable, successful and reasonably peaceful political community – it is necessary to resolve basic disputes, render cooperation possible and make human life desirable. To develop this argument Hobbes outlines a particular conception of the state of nature, by which he means any social condition in which people are in want of a “common power to keep them all in awe” (Hobbes 1994, XIII 8). Life in the state of nature is life without a Leviathan. While Hobbes is most certainly including in the state of nature the primitive societies I am characterizing as “the Indian” – “the savage people in many places of *America*,” as he puts it (*ibid.* XIII 11) – he has in mind any context without an effective state. “Prehistoric or primitive societies *may* exemplify

that condition, but so may societies which are less remote...A state of nature is one into which any civil society will lapse if government breaks down” (Curley 1994, xxi). In such cases, people have complete freedom in the sense that they are free to pursue their appetites, limited only by the power of others and by natural laws (though, these are relatively weak imperatives because they are secondary to one’s natural right of self-preservation) (Hobbes XIV and XV).

However, the limitation on one’s freedom by others is likely to be significant because people in the state of nature have roughly equal physical and mental strength.

Nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind that...the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself. And as to the faculties of the mind...I find yet a greater equality amongst men than that of strength. For prudence is but experience, which equal time equally bestows on all men in those things they equally apply themselves unto. (*ibid.* XII 1 – 2).

People, in other words, have roughly equal mental capacities and, though there are differences in physical strength, even the weakest people can conspire to kill the strongest. In such a situation no one is safe: the weakest can expect to be dominated, while the strongest must constantly fear for their own safety. For Hobbes, then, the key problem with the state of nature is the *radically decentralized nature of violence*: it can come at anytime, from anyone and from any direction. Indeed, the natural equality discussed above renders everyone constantly vulnerable and fearful of others. For Tuck (2002, 69), the result is “a radical instability in the state of nature...The state of nature thus becomes a state of war, savagery and degradation...” Or, as Hobbes (*ibid.* XIII 9) puts it, that life in the state of nature is characterized by “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” This most famous passage from *Leviathan* sets up the problem in the starkest of terms: Life without a state makes society impossible and makes the lives of individuals so consumed with fear, poverty and violence that life is utterly unbearable.

The question that Hobbes clearly sets up is: “How can we get out of this condition called the state of nature so that we may have a life that is worth living?” The beauty of the Hobbesian argument is precisely that his account of the “state of nature” makes it extraordinarily difficult to resist his statist and centripetal logic. If the essential problem in the state of nature is that violence is so widely dispersed that it is a consistently destabilizing force, then the solution is simple: centralize society’s violence capacity in the state and isolate legitimate violence as only that emanating from the Leviathan. While Hobbes does allow that one always retains his right to self-preservation or defensive violence – “a man cannot lay down the right of resisting them that assault him by force, to take away his life” (*ibid.* XIV 8) – this use of violence constitutes the exception, rather than the rule. In general, it is only the sovereign who has the legitimate and unquestionable right to the use of violent force. And, certainly, violence can *never* be used against the sovereign: “no man that hath sovereign power can justly be put to death, or otherwise in any manner by his subjects punished” (*ibid.* XVIII 7). Thus, we can interpret Hobbes’ thinking here as exemplary of a centripetal logic: it pulls society’s capacity for violence toward the center.

Hobbes, centripetal logic is on display with regards to more than just violence, however. Indeed, the crux of his argument for sovereignty follows the same general logic. If we are to leave the state of nature, then the task is to create a “common power to keep [us] all in awe.” Note in the following passage the emphasis on unification, on moving not just the capacity for violence, but more broadly, the capacity for power to a single center.

The only way to erect such a common power...is [for people] to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of wills, unto one will...and therein to submit their wills, everyone to his will, and their judgments, to his judgment. This is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person, made by covenant of every man with every man, in such manner as if every man

should say to every man *I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.* This done, the multitude so united in one person is called a COMMONWEALTH...This is the generation of the great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *Mortal God* to which we owe, under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence. For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him that by terror thereof he is enabled to conform the wills of them all to peace at home and mutual aid against enemies abroad...[T]his person is called SOVERIEGN (*ibid.* XVII 13).

For Hobbes, power must be concentrated at the center for it to be effective in overcoming the problems endemic to the state of nature. Indeed, perhaps the central lesson that Hobbes communicates is that the Leviathan's power must not only be strong and centralized, but fully sovereign. In short, the logical conclusion of centripetal thinking is the absolute state. This is surely a high price to pay, but given the horrors of the state of nature it is a price that, on Hobbes' account, is clearly worth it. Any efforts to limit or divide the state's power or to allow it to be questioned by subjects, would defeat the purpose of the entire enterprise, which was to eliminate disputes between people that have the capacity to erupt into violence. Precisely what is needed is an absolute state, incapable of being questioned.

The same features of human nature which would make life in the state of nature so miserable also make it impossible for any government to be effective if it does not possess absolute power. To try to limit the powers of government by a constitution or by dividing authority...is to invite the anarchy and misery of the state of nature (Curley 1994, viii).

In this section, I have presented a very cursory overview of Hobbes' argument for an absolute state. My goal has been primarily to present him as representative of a centripetal, statist logic of power and to explain the thinking behind this view. While Hobbes' defense of an absolute state has few adherents today, his arguments about the undesirability of the state of nature – primarily because of the radically decentralized nature of violence that characterizes it – remains influential. Thus, even if many thinkers do not concur with Hobbes that an *absolute*

state is the only way out of the state of nature, most do agree that a) we ought to get out of the state of nature, and b) a state – adopting at least partially Hobbes’ centripetal logic – is necessary. In the second half of the essay, I will present an alternative viewpoint: that there are ways of avoiding (or at least minimizing) the problems of the state of nature without recourse to a state monopoly on violence and the serious issues that monopoly raises for freedom as non-domination.

However, prior to developing this alternative to Hobbesian centripetal logic, I need to dwell a bit longer on Hobbes’ continuing import. After all, it could well be asked: Is it not anachronistic to use Hobbes as a foil for an anti-sovereign politics or anti-statist logic of power? Is anyone really a Hobbesian today in the sense that they defend an absolutist state? If not, then perhaps in framing the argument this way, I am setting up a caricature of the argument for state sovereignty. If this were true, then rather than presenting a novel critique of, and alternative to, state sovereignty (grounded in insights from anarchist anthropology), I would be merely adding to well-established liberal and republican opposition to the absolute state. However, I want to suggest that republican and liberal thinking is actually grounded in Hobbesian thinking, rather than constituting an alternative to it. Having just outlined Hobbes’s centripetal logic of power – an argument that culminates in a defense of an absolute state – I now need to show that one cannot so easily accept the first part of Hobbes’s argument (the desirability of a state) without also accepting the conclusion (that such a state must be absolute). If this is true, then defenders of freedom as non-domination must be less sanguine about the possibility of freedom within the state and more open to theorizing freedom outside of, or in opposition to, the state.



## II. Locating the Leviathan in Republican (and Liberal) Thought

In the following two sections, I draw on insights from Martel's *Subverting the Leviathan* to make two basic points. First, both republicanism and liberalism begin from the assumption of a sovereign state and seek only to ameliorate and limit it. As a result, the core arguments in favor of the Leviathan (discussed above) are generally assumed. The consequence of this is a loss of clarity what is at stake in choosing to sovereignty (and even that it is a choice at all). The second and related point is that perhaps the core Hobbesian insight is that sovereignty is an all or nothing proposition. In other words, efforts to tame the Leviathan – to limit or constrain a sovereign state, an entity that has monopolized the legitimate use of violence in society – is an impossible task. What Hobbes suggests is that all states – even those with a veneer of rights and the rule of law – are, fundamentally, absolutist. I develop the first of these claims in this section and take on the second claim in the following section.

On the surface, Pettit explicitly and persuasively distinguishes his position from Hobbes. Pettit identifies Hobbes as the most important transitional figure in moving from a conception of freedom as non-domination to freedom as non-interference. For Hobbes, “people are free so far as they are not interfered with” (Pettit 2001, 146). This change in thinking lead Hobbes and others following him to conclude that the type of regime in place did not matter for freedom, since all laws were necessarily coercive interference – all that mattered for freedom was the presence of a private sphere in which the state did not intrude. For reasons discussed in the last chapter, such a view is problematic and Pettit is right to differentiate his position from Hobbes. However, despite Pettit's critique of Hobbes and the liberal conceptions of freedom that emerged from his thought, Pettit relies on Hobbesian arguments for the unavoidability of sovereign state power.

As I have already shown, Pettit frames the entire question of political theory in terms of the state: political theory is "...the theory of what the state ought to be and do?" (*ibid.* 152). As such, the state is taken as a given from the start. Moreover, Pettit ends up recommending broadly liberal mechanisms to limit the state's power and protect individual liberty: rule of law, separation of powers, deliberative democracy, bicameral legislatures, depoliticized decision-making, independent accountability and freedom of information (*ibid.* 168 – 69). Indeed, he explicitly suggests that his theory points toward a "liberal...form of republican theory" (*ibid.* 152). I, of course, do not mean to suggest that such procedural constraints on the state are without merit, but merely to argue that Pettit's republicanism begins from the unquestioned assumption of a state and ends up endorsing political recommendations that, like liberalism, merely seek to constrain the worst aspects of state sovereignty. The radical concept of freedom as non-domination is, in this way, turned into an essentially liberal call for a limited and representative government. The reason that the republican theory advanced by Pettit becomes, in essence, a justification for a limited and representative government is because both liberals and republicans operate on the basis of Hobbesian arguments. Both liberals, committed to the Hobbesian concept of individual freedom as non-interference, and republicans committed to individual freedom as non-domination, ultimately embrace sovereignty. In short, both assume, and then seek to constrain, the Leviathan.

Usually those who see Hobbes as a 'proto' liberal are acknowledging by that mediating term ('proto') that Hobbes sets a necessary foundation for liberalism but that liberalism itself does not become 'liberalism,' as we know it, until Hobbes's sovereign is somehow tamed (chiefly by Locke). Hobbes, as read by liberals, does [liberalism's] dirty work; a 'good cop/bad cop' situation is produced in which Hobbes ('bad cop') gives a rationale for sovereignty so that 'good cop' liberal authors...don't have to. They can safely 'ameliorate' liberalism because its rationale – and absolute authority – is safely in place (Martel 2007, 230 – 31).

On this reading, then, Hobbes is a central figure for both liberals and for republicans. Though there are important differences between these schools of thought (not least in their definition of freedom, as discussed above), they agree on one central point: The state is unavoidable; an evil perhaps, but a necessary one. The crucial task of both liberal and republican theory is to constrain this beast. “The key to enduring sovereignty [which they see as inevitable] is to soften its hard edges, to make it accountable to certain, basic principles [e.g. rights] that it cannot contravene. In some sense, such a stance can be seen as the essence of liberalism, broadly defined” (*ibid.* 229). However, starting from the premise that the state is an unavoidable part of our political landscape enables liberal and republican thinkers alike to avoid coming to terms with the true nature of sovereignty and, as a consequence, to not fully appreciate a) the depth of the incompatibility between freedom and the state or b) the impossibility of limiting sovereignty. What is unique and important about Hobbes is that he was writing at a time before sovereignty was established and enshrined – before it was seen as an unavoidable part of politics. Martel argues that we read Hobbes as clarifying the true costs of submitting to sovereignty – and, at an even more fundamental level, that it is a choice at all. “Hobbes allows us to see [sovereignty] for what it really is: not the sine qua non of politics, but a usurpation and monopolization of political power” (Martel 2007, 3). As will become clear later in the essay, not all political communities have chosen sovereignty and, for those of us who endorse freedom as non-domination, we too can and should choose differently. For the time being, let us focus on the most serious consequence of choosing sovereignty: it is an all or nothing proposition.

### III. The Leviathan Lurking Behind Liberalism

To put the argument advanced in this section bluntly: it is not only that liberalism assumes the Leviathan and tries to limit it, but that the task of limiting the Leviathan is an impossible one. To defend (or assume) a state, is to defend (or assume) an absolute state.

[Liberal thinkers] want sovereignty to be both a foundation for liberalism and not one; they seek an absolute that is not quite absolute... To argue that there is a “Law of the Peoples” or “absolute rights” that trump and ameliorate sovereign power must mean either that sovereign power does not exist (since it must be ultimate to exist at all) or that such rights are merely wishes in the face of sovereign power... Indeed, this is exactly what any reading of Hobbes tells us; if we are going to choose sovereignty, we are choosing something that is absolute” (*ibid.* 231).

So, when Pettit (2001, 145) writes that “the attempt to defend [the absolute] state” is “anathema to contemporary republicans,” his claim rings both true and false. On the one hand, he seems clearly correct that no contemporary republican (or liberal) thinkers wish to defend an absolute state. On the other hand, a state cannot, fundamentally, be anything other than absolute, and thus arguments that seek to defend a non-absolutist state gloss over what they actually do: justify an entity that centralizes and monopolizes the legitimate use of violence in society.

Let me propose a thought experiment. Imagine that in coming decades a major and militant movement emerged in this country against the escalating repression of civil liberties. Imagine that this movement grew in size and that significant portions of this movement sought to overthrow the government (since neither political party was willing or able to halt the surveillance state). Facing such a threat, how do you think the U.S. government would respond? Would they engage in pervasive surveillance of political dissidents? Would they infiltrate and disrupt oppositional organizations? Would they ban protests that do not receive prior authorization from the state? Would they imprison people without trials? Would they engage in

mass arrests whenever dissidents gather publically? Would they assassinate leaders? Would they fire into crowds?

I would suggest the following principle: *Any* state faced with an existential threat – a challenger seeking to dismantle or overthrow it – will do whatever it can to maintain its power for as long as possible, most certainly including the suspension of basic rights and the mobilization of violence against its citizens. This suggests that, at its core, *the state is absolute*. If a state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence – and, perhaps even more importantly, has such an extremely unequal capacity for violence in comparison to citizens’ capacity to do violence – it is not possible to put *actual limits* on the state’s power. In other words, no amount of legal rights, or divided powers, or checks and balances actually undercuts sovereignty. The liberal state is still a sovereign state. As Carl Schmitt (2005, 5) has famously put it: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” where the exception is any major political, economic or social disturbance that requires the state – in its efforts to maintain control and normalize the situation – to use extraordinary measures. The sovereign “decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it...[I]t is he who must decide whether the constitution must be suspended in its entirety” (*ibid.* 7). In focusing on the extreme case, the exception, Schmitt pulls back the veneer of rights and rule of law that characterize liberal and constitutional states, to uncover sovereignty. “What characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order. In such a situation it is clear that the state remains where law recedes” (*ibid.* 12).

None of this is to say that, *under normal circumstances*, there are not important differences between the behaviors of states. This seems an incontrovertible fact. Further, I am not arguing that there is a moral equivalence between all states. There are many reasons that I,

and I suspect nearly everyone else, would prefer to life in a state characterized by the rule of law than one characterized by the whims of the sovereign. As Hayek (2007, 112) nicely argues:

Nothing distinguishes more clearly conditions in a free country from those in a country under arbitrary government than the observance in the former of the great principles known as the Rule of Law. Stripped of all technicalities, this means that government in all its actions is bound by rules fixed and announced beforehand.

But such an idealistic and utopian account of the rule of law misses a crucial fact: Rule of law can only exist if there is a sovereign state to enforce it. In this sense, as Martel (2007, 231 – 232) puts it, the liberal argument is circular: “the sovereign...sets and determines the very ‘natural law’ that is used to trump sovereign power.” This does not mean that rights are trivial or unimportant, nor does it entail that rights are to be rejected. However, such a conclusion does suggest that we ought to understand them differently. Following Linda Zerilli (2005, 127), I believe rights are best seen as the “legal artifacts of freedom.” They are, in other words, what remains from past mobilizations of collective power in opposition to the state and count as important victories insofar as they put constraints on the state’s power and provide citizens with room to maneuver. They are not, however, ends-in-themselves, nor are they synonymous with freedom, nor do they trump sovereign power. The sovereign state is able, even if it is not “allowed,” to change these rights or make exceptions to them. As such, there is a clear disjuncture between this usual day-to-day reality – in which individual rights and the rule of law generally function – with the reality one sees as soon as people begin to challenge the state. For this reason, and despite all the advantages of life within the liberal state, it makes sense to dwell on the exception and to consider its critical importance.

Precisely a philosophy of concrete life must not withdraw from the exception and the extreme case...The exception can be more important to it than the rule, not because of a romantic irony for the paradox, but because the seriousness of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalizations inferred from what ordinarily

repeats itself... The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception, the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition (Schmitt 2005, 15).

In a state of emergency or, more pointedly, in a revolutionary context (and even, it seems, contexts that have even the slightest possibility of becoming revolutionary) the proverbial gloves come off. Rights and the rule of law are compatible with the state only when the state's fundamental claim to rule remains unchallenged. If the state's sovereignty is challenged and the veneer of rights and the rule of law is pulled back, the Leviathan lurking behind the liberal state is clearly exposed.

I hope it is clear in the preceding argument that I am not arguing that liberal thinkers actually endorse an absolute state or that they would be opposed to overthrowing a state if it did indeed cast aside the rule of law and run roughshod over people's rights. After all, Locke (1980, 113) clearly endorses the right of people to dissolve the government should they suffer "a long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices, all tending the same way." But, the right to revolution, as with all other rights, depends for its enforcement and its realization, on the state's compliance – that is to say, on the sovereign's will. And at what time is it more likely for the sovereign to claim an exception than when its rule is threatened? In short, no state respects its citizens' right to revolution. The issue, therefore, is not that liberalism fails to appreciate the necessity of revolution, but it does not provide the appropriate means to carry it out. The *power* of the sovereign trumps the *rights* of the revolutionaries.

Sovereignty, a system in which all power is kept for the sovereign itself, is incompatible with any genuinely radical democratic practice, even its 'kinder, gentler,' more tolerant variance as liberal sovereignty. Liberty is (or rights are) merely the consolation prize for the power we give up when we submit to sovereignty (Martel 2007, 232).

What opponents of sovereignty need, then, is a weapon appropriate to the task of contesting the absolute state, a mechanism to prevent and reverse the logic of centripetal power.

In the following sections, I suggest that centripetal power should be met with its opposite: centrifugal power. Centripetal power has a strong pull: once one starts on the path of drawing power toward the center and creating a sovereign – “an authority which is external and the creator of its own legality” – this process is nearly impossible to stop. The best way to resist the dangers of sovereignty is not through efforts to limit and constrain the sovereign, but to make it difficult for a sovereign to arise at all. But is this possible? I have been treating the assumption of the necessity of a Leviathan, upon which republicans and liberal alike depend, as though it is a problem. Perhaps, this assumption, however, is perfectly correct – there is no alternative to the sovereignty: the state is unavoidable, and as such we will need to settle for rights as the best remedy (albeit a tenuous one) for the problems inherent in sovereignty. In short, this is the claim that, even if sovereignty is problematic, we should still choose it because there is no viable alternative. But, as Martel (2007, 241) argues “there is a kind of tautology to the liberal position; the notion that ‘there is no alternative’ is a rhetorical argument, a kind of authoritative... decision that denies or dismisses further inquiry, making itself the basis of its own justification.” The task of the remainder of this chapter is to demonstrate that this view is mistaken. There is an alternative to sovereignty, to the state, to the centripetal logic of power. In this sense, I propose with Martel (*ibid.* 178), “...a conspiracy against sovereignty.” Utilizing insights from anarchist anthropology, I will show that this is an age-old conspiracy – one that both pre-dates the state and remains relevant in our statist world today.

In fleshing out this “Indian” conspiracy I show how it is possible to organize power precisely to prevent the rise of sovereignty. I focus on three levels of analysis within the study of



non-state societies. First, I will look at the relationship between non-state societies and statist societies, arguing that (and briefly explaining how) non-state societies have sought to evade incorporation into states. In this section, drawing, primarily on work by James C. Scott, I make the argument that there is a long history of *not* choosing the state – that, in other words, people have opted to live without a state and endeavored to maintain statelessness. Second, I will focus on the internal politics within non-state societies, focusing in particular on how power is organized so as to prevent the Chief from ever becoming a state. My aim here will be to argue that not only have people resisted incorporation into states, but that their politics are actually anti-statist in orientation. Using work by Pierre Clastres, I show that the “Indian” organization of power is functions precisely to prevent the centripetal logic of sovereignty. Third, I will look at the “external” relationships between non-state societies, particularly in the conflictual interactions between tribes. While war and violence generally have a centripetal logic that is oriented toward ever greater centralization of power, I will argue that non-state societies have approached conflict and war in ways that tend to have centrifugal or dispersing functions. In summary, the following engagements with anarchist anthropology aim to shed light on the politics of non-state societies by way of arguing that there is an alternative, centrifugal logic of power that avoids the problem of sovereignty and that this alternative may foster a more robust freedom than that which can be offered by the sovereign state.

#### **IV. Choosing Statelessness: A Brief History of State Evasion**

It is often assumed that primitive societies are, well, primitive because they lack the institutions that define politics for us. They lack a centralized political entity that has the sovereign authority to make final decisions over a given territory. More specifically, they lack a codified legal system, which includes both primary laws about the actual conduct of humans and

secondary rules for resolving conflicts over the primary laws themselves (Hart 1961, 92; Finnis 1980, 7). In short, primitive societies are thought to be non-political because they lack a state. But even this language – that such societies *lack* a state – is symptomatic of the broader problem, which is a unidirectional and transparently self-congratulatory view of progress: “that history is a one-way street, that societies without [state] power are the image of what we have ceased to be, and that for them our culture is the image of what they have to become” (Clastres 1987, 18). The implicit assumption here is that these societies are in some way *deficient* for not having a state – they are, to use the standard words, primitive, savage, backward or undeveloped.<sup>10</sup> In other words, our very vocabulary makes it difficult to appreciate the politics of non-state societies, to recognize their agency and to appreciate “the depth of their political philosophy” (Clastres 1987, 44). Instead of condemning non-state societies to the dustbin of history (or, should I say, “pre-history” – that term we use to conveniently cast aside thousands of years of non-state societies), we would do well to consider their ongoing relevance to our contemporary situation.

It is not that these societies *lack* a state, but that, at least in some cases, these societies have developed a politics to *avoid* the state. The argument here is not only is there an alternative to the state, but that people who have witnessed state-making projects, seen the potential to be incorporated into them, and have instead actively chosen to evade them. As Scott has demonstrated, there is a long but often overlooked history of communities opposing the logic of centralization and resisting incorporation into nation-states. “The huge literature on state-

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<sup>10</sup> The view that such societies are backward is not only the result of their not having a state, but also because of a common that hunter-gather and subsistence agricultural economies are characterized by a constant search for food and struggle for survival. But, such a view is generally mistaken. Marshall Sahlins (1968) famously described hunter-gather societies as the ‘original affluent society,’ noting that they lived well with approximately three to five hours of work per day: “An affluent society is one in which all the people’s wants are easily satisfied...A fair case can be made that hunters often work much less than we do, and rather than a grind the food quest is intermittent, leisure is abundant, and there is more sleep in the daytime per capita than in any other conditions of society...Rather than anxiety, it would seem, hunters have a confidence born of affluence, or a condition in which all the people’s wants (such as they are) are generally easily satisfied.”

making...pays virtually no attention to its obverse: the history of deliberate and reactive statelessness. This is the history of those who got away...Gypsies, Cosacks, polygot tribes...fugitive slave communities, the Marsh Arabs, San-Bushmen, and so on” (Scott 2009, x). Scott’s work *The Art of Not Being Governed* details, in particular, the saga of hill peoples of “Zomia” – a highland region in Southeast Asia that includes portions of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma and China – as they have struggled against and evaded various state-making projects for hundreds of years. In essence, states attempt to “make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplif[y] the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and the prevention of rebellion” (Scott 1998, 2). These attempts to increase society’s legibility and hence its controllability involve (among many other things and not necessarily in this order): 1) the creation of permanent last names, 2) the taking of a census and surveys, 3) the concentration of population, generally in flat terrain 4) the establishment of monoculture agriculture (in contrast to various forms of polyculture and slash-and-burn agriculture), 5) the standardization of forms of measurement, such as a weight and distance, 6) the standardization of language, and 7) the grid-based design of cities (see both: Scott 1998 and Scott 2009). We can read these efforts to make society legible to the center as laying the foundation for centripetal power. Legibility, however, is not a dichotomous variable that is either present or absent. Rather, it is a question of for whom a particular practice or organizational form is made legible. To take but one example, whereas a complex web of streets, alleys and pathways through a town may be perfectly legible to the people who live in and use these routes daily, they are extraordinarily illegible to a distant, would-be governor (in comparison to a grid structure). States’ depend on society being made legible to the center. “An

illegible society, then, is a hindrance to an effective intervention by the state, whether the purpose of that intervention is plunder or public welfare” (Scott 1998, 78).

Scott usefully draws our attention to the long history of people’s efforts to resist and evade these state-making projects, to see them for what they are: efforts to move power to the center at the expense of the periphery. In large part, at least in the case of Zomia, the strategy to avoid the state involved migrating to regions that are difficult to govern – notably, mountainous regions, dense forests and swamplands – where the “friction of terrain” (Scott 2009, xii) make state-making projects (some of which are noted above) extraordinarily difficult. It is not a coincidence that non-state communities live in such landscapes, but rather a deliberate choice. However, this is not simply a question of using the natural geography of a region, but also of manipulating that geography to enhance the friction of terrain.

For those wishing to maximize the friction...a host of countervailing strategies are available: destroying bridges, ambushing or booby-trapping passes and defiles, felling trees along roads, cutting telephone and telegraph wires, and so forth” (*ibid.* 166).

Aside from the selection and construction of geography (one’s location), Scott argues that the other primary strategy for state evasion is “mobility: the ability to change locations” (*ibid.* 184). When facing a threat or an incursion, non-state people will often disperse into smaller groups, move to different locations, only to (sometimes) reform later. Scott (*ibid.* 219) argues that the Karen people, in particular, are known for their autonomous and loosely structured social order.

The utter plasticity of social structure among the more democratic, stateless, hill peoples can hardly be exaggerated. Shape-shifting, fissioning, disaggregation, physical mobility, reconstitution, shifts in subsistence routines are often so dizzying that the very existence of the units beloved of anthropologists – the village, the lineage, the tribe, the hamlet – are called into question. In summary, “[i]naccessibility and dispersal are the enemies” of state-making projects and have enabled non-state peoples, utilizing the friction of terrain, to successfully evade state incorporation (*ibid.* 182). At least, that is, for a time.

Sadly, from the perspective of non-state societies, the development of new “distance-demolishing technologies: bridges, all-weather roads...advanced techniques of defoliation, helicopters, airplane, and modern satellite photography...diminish that friction” (*ibid.* 168). And, indeed, these technological advances have “so changed the balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states” that it is increasingly difficult to remain outside of the state’s reach (*ibid.* xii).<sup>11</sup> As a result, Scott concludes that over the course of the last 50 or 60 years, much of Zomia has been increasingly incorporated into the surrounding states. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this fact as an inevitability and, thus, as a statement on the futility of resisting the Leviathan. Rather, the problem is that too many of us have been seduced by the Leviathan and, rather than challenging it from within, have left non-state societies increasingly marginalized and vulnerable to state incursions and incorporation. Perhaps if we had not so arrogantly assumed that we were the civilized, advanced and developed ones (and they the primitive, backward and undeveloped ones), we could have seen more clearly what we were submitting to, what we were losing in the process *and* that there was an alternative. In any case, the central point I want to make here is that non-state societies do not *lack* a state due to being undeveloped, unimaginative or incapable of creating one, but have rather *chosen* to resist state formation and/or evade state incorporation. People have preferred to live outside of the state and have struggled to avoid it. Perhaps this is a choice we still have available to us today, though given how far we have allowed the state to make society legible to the center and to develop its technological and organizational repertoire of surveillance and repression, it will clearly be a more difficult choice to make.

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<sup>11</sup> I think that this conclusion demonstrates that the power of the state is less a function of what it is *legally allowed to do*, than it is a function of what the state is *technologically capable of doing*. The recent revelations regarding NSA surveillance, I think, suggest the same conclusion. In this sense, it is problematic to think we can constrain the state through laws and appeal to rights – a point I aimed to develop above. Instead, a more appropriate strategy is to undercut the technological and organizational tools that make state incursions possible in the first place.

## **V. Power Without Sovereignty: Why the Chief Is Not a Nascent State**

The evidence presented above challenges the standard assumption that states are a) an inevitable and natural development and b) that states are so clearly superior to a condition of statelessness that anyone presented with the option to remain in the “state of nature” or authorize a sovereign would choose the latter. It seems, rather that (and I am only scratching the surface) that many communities have seen the state and sought to avoid it. However, could it be that while primitive societies have self-consciously resisted incorporation into particular nation-states, they have not themselves transcended the logic of the state? My aim in this section is to take insights from anarchist anthropology to shed greater light on the internal politics of non-state societies and, in particular, the organization of power within these societies. I will focus in particular on the work of Pierre Clastres, who has been instrumental in this regard, having spent decades investigating power among the Indian tribes of the Amazon. Though they do not have formal states, he wondered, do they not have power? His question, then, is “whether, when there is neither coercion nor violence, is it impossible to speak of power?” (Clastres 1987, 11).

In interpreting the politics of such societies, one is immediately confronted with the apparent reality that most tribes do have chiefs and, therefore, one must immediately ask whether the chief is simply a nascent state: Were the social group larger and bureaucratic technologies better developed, would the chief not look similar to our modern conception of a state? To put this differently, do such societies actually offer an alternative to the Leviathan or, rather, have they merely developed a more primitive version of the same phenomenon? In other words, are these really non-state societies, at all? On one level, such an objection is mere question-begging. The question that is at issue is precisely why these societies have not developed larger populations, with greater bureaucratic organization and more “advanced” technological control.

To assume that they are simply “pre-political” in this sense and are ultimately moving in the direction of Western societies is symptomatic of the deeply problematic assumptions about progress noted above. However, there is a more direct and, I think, satisfying answer to the challenge: While there are chiefs, these chiefs do not monopolize political power and, most surely, are not nascent states. As Clastres (*ibid.* 11 – 12) argues:

All, or almost all, are headed by leaders, chiefs, and – this decisive feature merits attention – none of the caciques possesses any ‘power.’ One is confronted, then, by a vast constellation of societies in which the holders of what elsewhere would be called power are actually without power; where the political is determined as a domain beyond coercion and violence, beyond hierarchical subordination; where, in a word, no relationship of command-obedience is in force. This is the major difference of the Indian world, making it possible to speak of the American tribes as a homogenous universe despite the extreme diversity of cultures moving within it.

While relationships of command and obedience are often equated with political power, for Clastres, coercion and subordination are not always constitutive of power. Non-state societies do have their own logic of power, but it is a logic which prevents the development of relationships of command and obedience from arising.

Political power is *universal*...it manifests itself in two primary modes: coercive power, and non-coercive power. Political power as coercion is not the *only* model of true power, but simply a *particular case*, a concrete realization of political power in some cultures” (*ibid.* 22).

In other words, even non-state societies have political power. The difference is simply that they use that power as a check on coercive capabilities, rather than as a means of inflicting coercion. It is here, in the internal relations between chief and tribe, that we catch our first glimpse of centrifugal power – a way of organizing power such that challenges rather than reinforces centralizing and monopolizing tendencies.

If power is used to check centralization, then we will need to specify what functions the chief serves, what power those functions provide him with, and how, despite the foregoing

consideration, how the chief nonetheless does not resemble a state nor monopolizes power.

According to Clastres (*ibid.* 29) there are three distinctive features of an Indian leader or chief: 1)

He is a peacemaker, the agent who moderates and mediates conflicts; 2) He must be generous with his possessions; 3) He must be a good orator. In regards to the first characteristic, despite its surface similarity to Hobbes' common judge, the Indian chief takes a much different form.

He must appease quarrels and settle disputes – not by employing a force he does not possess and which would not be acknowledged in any case, but by relying solely on the strength of his prestige, his fairness, and his verbal ability. *More than a judge who passes a sentence, he is an arbiter who seeks to reconcile*” (*ibid.* 30).

In this sense, while he serves a similar dispute-resolution function as a state, the chief is not sovereign. Regarding the second characteristic of generosity, the chief is required to constantly present gifts and share food with others and any attempt to avoid such gift-giving is met with a withdrawal of power and prestige. Clastres (*ibid.* 30 – 31) cites Francis Huxley, an anthropologist who lived about the Urubu Indians of Brazil, as saying, “In some Indian tribes you can always tell the chief because he has the fewest possession and wears the shabbiest ornaments.” In this sense, Indian societies separate political power from economic power and, in doing so, provide a strong check against the emergence of a state, which has the capacity to use force to secure valuable resources and enact a particular division of labor. The third characteristic of the chief is his oratory skills, which suggests an important connection in Indian societies between speech and political power. However, there is a key difference. “Indian societies do not recognize the chief's right to speak because he is the chief: they require the man destined to be chief prove his command over words. Speech is an imperative obligation for a chief” (*ibid.* 153). Therefore, it is more accurate to say that one who commands speech is afforded political *prestige*, rather than to say that one who has political *power* has the right to



speech. This intriguing reversal suggests that the chief is not the locus of power as the state is. Instead, power rests within the political community. While the chief is responsible for solving conflicts, he is only given the power to do so as long as he does so successfully. Moreover, the chief is not a judge who mandates a solution.

*The chief's word carries no force of law.* If the effort to persuade should fail, the conflict then risks having a violent outcome, and the chief's prestige may very well be the casualty, since he will have proved his inability to accomplish what was expected of him...The chief is there to serve society; it is society as such – the real locus of power – that exercises its authority over the chief...primitive society would never tolerate having a chief transform himself into a despot (*ibid.* 206 – 07).

All of this should make clear that the chief does not only fail to meet the criteria of a primitive state because the chief is not even the real center of political power. He does not and cannot issue demands and the people of the tribe are under no obligation to obey. The real locus of power is the community itself, which respects and recognizes the chief only insofar as he continues to be socially useful.

Despite the severe restrictions on his power, however, the chief serves vital roles for the community. In addition to his role as mediator, the chief is also a kind of community planner and representative to the outside world. Though the chief plans the economic and ceremonial activities, he does not give orders in the sense that he has no mechanism for enforcing them. The group's willingness to follow the chief is always fragile and contingent upon their approval.

That the savage chief does not hold the power to command does not make him useless: on the contrary he is vested by society with a certain number of tasks [such as representing the community to outsiders, planning ceremonies and mediating conflicts within the tribe], and in this capacity, can be seen as a sort of unpaid civil servant of society (*ibid.* 89).

In this way, Indian society has performed an ingenious twist: on the one hand, enabling an individual to perform some of the critical functions a state serves and, on the other hand,

effectively stripping the person the one with the most potential for achieving state-like political power of such opportunity and, moreover, continuously extracting gifts from him. David Graeber (2004, 22 – 23) brilliantly describes how this system functions to effectively incapacitate greedy or power-hungry individuals:

In gift economies there are, often, venues for enterprising individuals: But everything is arranged in such a way that could never be used as a platform for creating permanent inequalities of wealth, since self-aggrandizing types all end up competing to see who can give the most away. In Amazonian (or North American) societies, the institution of chief played the same role on a political level: the position was so demanding, and so little rewarding, so hedged about by safeguards, that there was no way for power-hungry individuals to do much with it.”

When focusing on the Chief-Tribe relationship a centrifugal organization of power allows for a chief to resolve conflicts but quite effectively prevents the chief from becoming a state-like entity that issues commands which people are obligated to obey. In doing so, the politics of the Indian then are designed precisely to prevent the rise of the state by ensuring that the chief – who occupies an important and potentially powerful social location – never actually takes power away from the society he is intended to serve. While in statist society it is the people who are under surveillance, [i]n the tribe, the chief is under surveillance...If the chief’s desire for power becomes too obvious, the procedure put into effect is simple: they abandon him, indeed, even kill him” (Clastres 1994, 91). Or, consider the words of Chief Alaykin explaining his position to a Spanish officer: “The Abipones...follow their own bidding and not that of their cacique. I am their leader, but I could not bring harm to my people without bringing harm to myself; if I were to use orders or force with my comrades, they would turn their backs on me at once” (Clastres 1987, 208). Thus, Indian societies show us the possibility of a politics and an organization of power that does not rely on or lead to a sovereign state, or a “separate organ of political power” (*ibid.* 165).

## **VI. War Against the State: How Primitive Violence Disperses Rather than Centralizes**

In Charles Tilly's (1975, 42) apt words: "War made the state, and the state made war." The reasons for this are fairly straight-forward. The efforts to implement taxation and other forms of extraction (which were often the goal of the various foundational state-making projects discussed above) were, of course, met with resistance and, as such, required military force to implement. "So turned the tight circle connecting state-making, military institutions and the extraction of scarce resources from a reluctant population" (*ibid.*, 23-24). If the result of these processes was the creation of an army, that army was then turned outward. War against other communities tended to "promote territorial consolidation, centralization, differentiation of the instruments of government and monopolization of the means of coercion, all the fundamental state-making processes" (*ibid.* 42). Hobbes's theoretical account of the creation of the Leviathan and Tilly's empirical account of the same process both bear the marks of a centripetal logic of power. And, as established states carried out additional wars the logic was always to bring more territory and more power to the center.

But must war, and more broadly violence, always bear this tendency or express this centripetal logic? Having established that the 'internal' politics of the tribe is organized so as to prevent the rise of the state, I now turn my attention to the "external" politics of the Indian – that is, to the conflictual and, at times, violent relationships between tribes. Hobbes principle of violence is one of unification: the way to resolve the conflict, violence and fear in the state of nature is to unify society's violent force into a single entity, the Leviathan. Precisely because the state would be capable of exercising overwhelming violent coercion it would be able to eliminate all other violent threats, thereby making a peaceful society possible. But in granting the state a monopoly on legitimate violence we have created an entity with the capacity for great and grave

forms of violence. In this sense, the sovereign state “is the proverbial fox guarding the hen house” (Martel 2007, 12). In this section, I suggest that non-state societies adopt a centrifugal logic of violence; that the function of conflict and war is to disperse populations and decentralize power. While this clearly is still not an ideal solution to the problem of violence, it may be preferable to the Hobbesian solution insofar as it avoids obvious problems with granting a monopoly on legitimate violence to a single entity. To be clear, this is not meant as an endorsement of violence, but rather as a way of fleshing out the two logics of power.

It is first necessary to distinguish between different types of violence and aggression, not all of which are created equal. Fromm in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973, 19) argues that the term aggression has been used equivocally, enabling it to equally describe “the behavior of a man defending his life against attack, to a robber killing his victim in order to obtain money, to a sadist torturing a prisoner.” In doing so, violence and aggression have not been well understood and have, in fact, lumped together phenomena that should be distinct. Fromm (*ibid.* 19 – 20) proffers a useful distinction between aggression (biologically adaptive, life-serving aggression) and destruction (biologically nonadaptive, malignant aggression). While both certainly involve violence, only the latter is a malignant kind of aggression which seeks to control or destroy entire populations. He is particularly concerned, justifiably, with destructive aggression – the proclivity to kill one person is certainly bad, but the penchant for killing or dominating entire peoples is abominable. “While we find in all cultures that men defend themselves against vital threats by fighting (or fleeing), destructiveness and cruelty are minimal” in many societies (*ibid.* 204).

Fromm carries this distinction further by utilizing ethnographic and archaeological evidence to examine violence in thirty primitive tribes. He ultimately classifies these societies

into three categories: 1) life-affirmative societies, 2) nondestructive-aggressive societies and 3) destructive societies. In ‘life-affirmative societies’ “there is a minimum of hostility, violence, or cruelty among people, no harsh punishment, hardly any crime, and the institution of war is absent or plays an exceedingly small role” (*ibid.* 194). “Nondestructive-aggressive societies” are similar to the first system in that they are not destructive, “but differ in that aggressiveness and war, although not central, are normal occurrences, and in that competition, hierarchy, and individualism are present” (*ibid.* 195). “Destructive societies’ are quite distinct from the previous two systems and are characterized by a great deal of “violence, destructiveness, aggression, and cruelty, both within the tribe and against others, a pleasure in war, maliciousness, and treachery” (*ibid.*). This classification shows that not all non-state societies are similar in regards to their internal authority or uses of violence. Indeed, on Fromm’s analysis, 28 percent fell into the first category, 50 percent in the second category and 22 percent in the final category. While some primitive peoples are indeed destructive, others seem to be almost entirely peaceable. I mention this so as not to give the false impression that violence and war was endemic to all non-state peoples, even though I am focusing on violence in this section.

In some ways, the most interesting group for the purposes of this essay are the nondestructive-aggressive societies, which use violence, but do so in a way that does not create – and perhaps prevents – centralization and domination. How did these nondestructive-aggressive societies utilize violence and warfare in ways that did not tend in this direction? Violence can take many different forms and one important distinction can be made between violence which seeks to assault versus violence which seeks to destroy, enslave or conquer. It is this latter form of violence that is most likely to tend toward centralization. Ruth Benedict (cited in Fromm 1973, 175) argues that, although warfare among North American Indian tribes was common...

...the idea of conquest never arose in aboriginal North America, and this made it possible for almost all these Indian tribes to do a very extreme thing: to *separate war from the state*... The Peace Chief was permanent, and though no autocratic ruler, he was often a very important personage. But he had nothing to do with war. He did not even appoint the war chiefs or concern himself with the conduct of war parties. Any man who could attract a following led a war party when and where he would... [His authority, however,] "...lasted only till the return of the war party.

Whereas Tilly argues that war-making was central to both the development of states and their expansion, Benedict contends that it was precisely by separating war-making from the Chief (the individual that was best positioned to become a nascent state), that war did not follow a centripetal logic. Clastres provides a similar account of both the Yanomami warrior Fousiwe and the Apache warrior Geronimo, both of whom tried to parlay success in an initially popular battle into more battles and more power. They both failed, with the former dying in a battle alone and the latter leading only a handful of men (Clastres 1987, 209 – 12). The key point here is that, in sharp contrast to centripetal logic advocated by Hobbes and explained by Tilly, war-making functions – violence in its most organized and extreme form – were separated from the state. As a result:

Primitive warfare... was neither centrally organized nor led by permanent chieftains; it was relatively infrequent; it was not war of conquest nor was it bloody war aimed at killing as many of the enemy as possible. Most civilized war, in contrast, is institutionalized, organized by permanent chieftains, and aims at conquest of territory and/or acquisition of slaves and/or booty" (Fromm 1973, 171 – 72).

The separation of war-making from the Chief, and the radical decentralization of the capacity for violence that it implies, did not lead to "the impulse to conquer people or territory, to subjugate human beings, or to destroy the basis for their livelihood" (*ibid.* 176). In short, war did not tend toward centralization. In what sense, though, did it follow a centrifugal logic oriented toward dispersion?

While Fromm finds a significant number of peaceful tribes along with more aggressive groups, Clastres (1994, 142 and 157) argues that, in the region he studies (Amazonia), “no primitive society escapes violence” and that “the possibility of war is inscribed in the being of primitive society.” And, it is in these violence-prone societies that the centrifugal logic becomes most clear. The argument is that Indian violence is distinct – in terms of both its different practices and different ends – from the unifying logic of Hobbesian violence. While there *is* war for the Indian, it is not destructive war.

Now all wars, as we know, leave a victor and a vanquished. What, in this case, would be the principal result of a war of all against all? It would institute precisely the political relationship that primitive society works constantly to prevent: the war of all against all would lead to the establishment of domination and power that the victor could forcibly exercise over the vanquished (*ibid.* 158).

Rather than a war of all against all, we see a network of alliances, but alliances that nearly constantly shift. Thus, Hobbes was correct that small groups are only capable of fragile and tenuous alliances.<sup>12</sup> He was wrong, however, that the result would be destructive. Rather, Indian societies need allies to ensure that they will not be the perpetual losers in conflict, but these alliances are constantly broken by betrayals – betrayals, however, that serve a specific function: they prevent the rise of any lasting alliances which would be capable of dominating other tribes. Rather, these fragile alliances protect a *balance of power* between tribes. No one tribe is so weak so that, without allies, it can be dominated and, yet, no tribe is so strong, that with its allies, it can effectively dominate.

What ends could such a logic of violence serve? The answer that Clastres presents suggests that the logic of Indian violence and the logic of the Leviathan’s violence are

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<sup>12</sup> “Nor is it the joining together of a small number of men that gives them this security; because in small numbers, small additions on the one side or the other make the advantage of strength so great as is sufficient to carry the victory; and therefore gives encouragement to an invasion” (Hobbes XVII 3).

diametrically opposed – the former seeks to disperse, while the latter seeks to unify. Clastres (*ibid.* 164 – 65) asks:

What is the function of primitive war? To assure the permanence of the dispersion, the parceling, the atomization of groups. Primitive war is the work of a *centrifugal logic*, a logic of separation, which is expressed from time to time in armed conflict. War serves to maintain each community's political independence...Now, what is the legal power that embraces all differences in order to suppress them, that exists precisely to abolish the logic of the multiple and to substitute it for the opposite logic of unification? What is the other name of this One that primitive society by definition refuses? It is the State.

While the Leviathan's logic of violence is to unify violent capacity into a single entity, the Indian's logic of violence seeks the opposite – to decentralize violent capacity so that no such Leviathan can emerge. “[I]t is not war that is the effect of segmentation, it is segmentation that is the effect of war. It is not only the end, but the goal...Primitive society wants dispersion...[and] primitive war is the means to a political end” (*ibid.* 153). Now the Leviathan's violence provides certain benefits; perhaps most importantly, the likelihood that most people most of the time will not engage in violent conflicts because the Leviathan's “terror” will hold potential perpetrators in “awe.” That said, as we have clearly seen throughout history, when statist violence erupts it occurs on an unimaginable scale. In contrast, violence for the Indian may be somewhat more frequent, though it will tend to be less destructive and less prone toward centralization – such is the cost of its logic of dispersion. While I think it is an important question to ask which logic of violence we prefer, that is not my aim here. Again, the argument in this section is not so much a defense of primitive violence as an explanation of how a centrifugal logic functions. The important point is simply that there is an alternative to the Leviathan. This alternative is a logic that seeks to disperse, rather than unify; a logic that accepts the possibility of frequent conflict from many directions, rather than the possibility of



domination from one; a logic that actively prevents, rather than actively establishes, the Leviathan, the Mortal God.

## **VII. Lessons from The Indian: Centrifugal Power Today**

My aim in this chapter has been to mobilize insights from anarchist anthropology to show that there is an alternative to sovereignty and centralization. That, if we take seriously those primitive societies, we can perhaps find within them lessons relevant for us today. In particular, that advocates of freedom as non-domination – a position I believe puts one in natural tension with the state – would do well to consider how a centrifugal logic of power might enhance that freedom today. If a centripetal logic of power – one that tends toward sovereignty and centralized power – is a grave threat to freedom as non-domination, then perhaps a centrifugal logic of power – one that tends toward the non-sovereignty and dispersal of power – can better enable freedom as non-domination. Centrifugal power minimizes the opportunities for domination or, at least, minimizes the extent of domination because it undercuts extreme power inequities that make domination possible. In subsequent chapters of the dissertation, I consider the relevance of centrifugal logic of power for democratic theory. As Hardt and Negri (2004, 80) suggest:

“[W]e should take a lesson from Pierre Clastres, who, while investigating the nature of war from an anthropological perspective, argues that we should never view the wars of the oppressors as the same as the wars of the oppressed... We need to grasp the kind of struggles that Clastres sees and recognize their adequate form in our present age.”

In short, what forms might the centrifugal logic of power take in a contemporary context? It is this challenge that I aim to take up in the subsequent chapters by theorizing certain social movement practices as the “adequate form in our present age” of the Indian mobilized against

the Leviathan. In particular, I argue that direct action and networked organization activate centrifugal power and, in so doing, have radically democratic potential.

Before moving onto these issues, though, let me conclude with a final dilemma. Clastres (1987, 218) concludes his seminal work with the following passage:

It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said, with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the State.

An important question remains, though. How could such societies have structured their political life so as to avoid something they would never have seen: a powerful central state?<sup>13</sup> The answer seems to be lost on Clastres, though it should have struck him clearly. As Graeber (2004, 22) notes: “Amazonians were not entirely unaware of what elementary forms of state power might be like – what it would mean to allow some men to give everyone else orders which could not be questioned, since they were backed up by the threat of force.” Indeed, it is well documented that many of the societies Clastres studied used rape as a tool to enforce gender roles and a certain division of labor between men and women. Such a realization – one that ought to dispel overly romantic conceptions of Indian life – helps provide an answer to the obvious question noted above.

Perhaps Amazonian men understand what arbitrary, unquestionable power, backed by force, would be like because they themselves wield that sort of power over their wives and daughters. Perhaps for that very reason they would not like to see structures capable of inflicting it on them (*ibid.* 23).

The challenge that the Indian presents to the Leviathan, therefore, is not simply a utopian alternative. In presenting the politics of non-state societies my aim is not to idealize such people nor is this a call to “go back” to a “primitive” way of living. Rather, my contention is that these

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<sup>13</sup> Such a question is not relevant to the subjects of Scott’s study who had (and have) clear exposure to the state, but this question is relevant to Clastres who was studying communities that were far removed from state-making projects.

societies offer a fundamentally different (though, of course, still problematic) way of confronting the basic problems of human existence. They offer an answer that does not rely on the sovereign state, that political entity that seems so natural, so unavoidable and so necessary to us today.

While contemporary political theory seems to largely eschew Hobbes for more liberal thinkers, at its core, much political theory, liberalism included, is still rooted in Hobbes' statist solution and his centripetal logic – a logic that can lead only to sovereignty. And, as I have endeavored to show, sovereignty is fundamentally at odds with freedom. For this reason, the ghost of the Indian – the ghost of those who rejected the Leviathan and show us that there is another way – ought to continue to haunt statist societies and political theorists alike.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF DIRECT ACTION

#### I. The “Occupy” in Occupy: Direct Action and Democracy

In the her American Political Science Association Presidential Address, published in *Perspectives on Politics*, Carol Pateman (2012) argues that participatory democracy is an increasingly relevant and plausible alternative to the deliberative model, which is dominant in political theory. She discusses, in particular, the growth of participatory budgeting processes in a number of municipalities around the world as exemplary of the contemporary potential of participatory democracy. Interestingly, though, the photograph on the cover of that issue of *Perspectives* was not of a participatory budgeting meeting or a similar formal assembly, but rather a raucous confrontation between protesters and police during the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City. While there is much to be desired about participatory budgeting, it is not at all synonymous with the form of democracy that is practiced during a street protest. In other words, there are important differences between participatory budgeting and an Occupy Wall Street protest – differences that are significant enough that they should not equated under the moniker of “participatory democracy.” While they are both surely participatory, they are not the same model of democracy. Indeed, the concept of participatory democracy does not adequately distinguish what is unique about the model of democracy practiced throughout the 2011 occupation movements. A major aim of the second half of this dissertation is to articulate and defend a theoretical account of this decentralized, unruly, and anarchistic model of democracy. In both this and the next chapter, I present an alternative account of radical democracy – based on practices of direct action and networked organization – that is not

synonymous with common understandings of either participatory democracy or direct democracy.

Indeed, while much attention has been paid to the general assemblies that characterized the Occupy movement, less attention has been paid to the direct actions – in this case, the unauthorized takings of space and the militant efforts required to hold them – that made the ongoing assemblies possible. Moreover, while the direct and deliberative forms of democracy that characterize the general assembly can be relatively easily folded into the discourse of democracy, the practice of direct action constitutes a greater challenge for democratic theory. Because, as I will discuss in more detail, direct action is not primarily or exclusively a dialogical act (at least not in the same way as is a protest, rally or assembly), it necessarily upsets the communicative focus of much democratic theory. I argue that direct action exposes the problems with seeing democracy in primarily (or exclusively) communicative terms. Thus, I use the practice of direct action to intervene in democratic theory, calling into question the emphasis placed on deliberation over action and communication over power.

In this chapter, I use the practice of direct action to challenge two reductions in democratic theory, one characteristic of mainstream communicative democrats and the other characteristic of radical democrats. Allow me to briefly outline both in turn. First, as I have already suggested, I challenge the reduction of democracy to deliberation and communication. This is not an effort to entirely displace communication nor is it an attempt to characterize communication as irrelevant to democratic politics. Rather, I intend to highlight important acts that are not simply communicative, and certainly not deliberative in the sense of fostering an inclusive conversation oriented toward mutual understanding. I want to show that the practice of direct action in particular can be simultaneously democratic and not reducible to a

communicative act. As such, I contend that democracy itself is not reducible to communication but, as I will argue, involves enactments of collective power. I hope to shift our view of democracy, such that deliberation and communication are backgrounded, while action and power are foregrounded.<sup>14</sup> This is not to deny or even downplay the significance of communication, both for democracy generally and for direct action in particular – both are necessarily communicative, but they are not *just* about communication. Using the practice of direct action to intervene in democratic theory will help expose the *communicative bias* in democratic theory – that is, a tendency to view democracy in terms of an exchange of ideas and/or the transmission of messages – while opening the door to a reconsideration of the role of power in a vibrant democratic politics.

However, securing a place within democratic theory for the practice of direct action may lead to another reduction I also want to challenge: the reduction of democratic politics to a politics of resistance. Though I take much inspiration from theorists of radical democracy such as Jacques Ranciere and Sheldon Wolin, too often these perspectives highlight acts of resistance to the social order, but neglect attempts to actually remake that social order by constructing an alternative society. While direct action is most assuredly a practice that intervenes and disrupts, it is not just a politics that resists, but also one that creates and prefigures. I will show through an analysis of the double-sided character of direct action a way to theorize a radical democratic politics that transcends resistance and is capable of articulating and building an alternative society.

To pursue this line of argument, I begin with a brief critique of the Habermasian emphasis on communication and deliberation in contemporary democratic theory. Through a

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<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Michael Ferguson's (2012, 13) *Sharing Democracy* for the notion of "shift[ing] our way of seeing" to reveal elements of democracy, which are occluded by dominant conceptions of democracy that prioritize commonality (in her case) and communication (in mine).

critical engagement with Jodi Dean's work, I show this emphasis has turned democracy into a neoliberal fantasy, but that this should not lead us to surrender democracy. Instead, I argue that the practice of direct action can overcome deliberation's weaknesses, without entirely abandoning democracy as a normative framework. To make this argument, I first define the practice of direct action and locate it within broader anarchist politics. I contend that there are two dimensions or sides to direct action (which sometimes, but not always, overlap): one side of direct action focuses on the disruption of existing power inequities, while the other side emphasizes the prefigurative creation of a free and egalitarian society. I argue that both disruptive and prefigurative forms of direct action have democratic potential. Through an engagement with Iris Marion Young, France Fox Piven and Jacques Ranciere, I build an account of the democratic potential of disruptive direct action insofar as such actions challenge or upset power inequalities and make real the political equality upon which democracy depends. Then, through an engagement with Hannah Arendt, I argue that prefigurative direct action has democratic potential insofar as it enables people to practice political freedom – that is, to shape the conditions of their lives and, in association with others, build our shared world. If disruptive direct action is about *reconfiguring* power vertically, prefigurative direct action is about *creating* power horizontally. Ultimately, I provide a democratic defense of the anarchist practice of direct action, arguing that it plays crucial democratic roles, if we are able to shift our view of democracy away from talking and towards doing. Let me be clear at the outset that my aim is not to defend all direct action as democratic, but to defend the democratic *potential* of direct action. Not all direct actions are democratic. Conversely, direct action, as both a disruptive and prefigurative force, can play a vital role in bolstering a vibrant democratic politics. My goal in this chapter is to highlight this potential of direct action, while acknowledging that such actions

may at times be prone to anti-democratic tendencies. I conclude the chapter by articulating a set of guidelines or criteria by which we might evaluate and/or amplify the democratic potentials of direct action.

## **II. The Reduction of Democracy to Deliberation and Communication**

### *Habermas's Deliberative Ideal and its Limits*

Jurgen Habermas seeks to understand how democracy is possible in the context of large-scale, complex and pluralistic societies – in particular how decisions in such a society are democratically legitimated. He proposes a discourse-based approach to legitimating decisions democratically. The discourse principle states: “Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses” (Habermas 1996, 107). The venues through which citizens can express their agreement or disagreement are the multi-leveled networks of the public sphere.

The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organization...The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes) (*ibid.* 360).

Examples of the public sphere, then, can include television, radio and newspapers, blogs and websites, popular and academic presses, concerts and art performances, and public meetings and protests.

The public sphere arguably plays *the* central role in Habermas's account of deliberative democracy. It is the primary mechanism for collective will formation and only through its proper functioning can democratic decisions be legitimated. The main functions Habermas outlines for the public sphere are to identify problems in society, set the agenda for legislative bodies, and, finally, to propose and critique various policy options and potential solutions.

“From the perspective of democratic theory, the public sphere must...amplify the pressure of



problems, that is, not only detect and identify problems but also convincingly and *influentially* thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions, and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes” (*ibid.* 359; emphasis in original). Thus, Habermas ascribes important functions to an educated, engaged and active citizenry and maintains that citizens can and should be involved in politics as more than an occasional voter. That said, the chief political activities of most citizens will not be in drafting legislation or voting on specific policies, but in participating (to greater or less degrees) in the conversations of the public sphere. Thus, for deliberative theorists such as Habermas, “democracy is envisioned as the exchange of reasons by participants in a discussion characterized by equality, inclusivity, reciprocity, and transparency” (Dean 2009, 78-79). Through a process of reasonable argumentation, citizens aim to reach a mutual understanding and come to an agreement that is satisfactory to all involved.

Despite his apparent emphasis on rationality Habermas argues that protests, disruptive actions and other kinds of contentious politics are an important precursor to deliberative democracy.

Sometimes the support of sensational actions, mass protests, and incessant campaigning is required before an issue can make its way via the surprising election of marginal candidates or radical parties, expanded platforms of ‘established’ parties, important court decisions, and so on, into the core of the political system and receive formal consideration (Habermas 1996, 381).

Moreover, Habermas endorses nonviolent lawbreaking as a legitimate means for civil society actors to press their case and have their message heard. As “protest movements reach a high point by escalating their protests...their last means for obtaining more of a hearing and greater media influence for oppositional arguments are acts of civil disobedience” (*ibid.* 382). In other words, symbolic acts of rule violation constitute a legitimate action for those actors who are

marginalized by the political public sphere. For Habermas, the role of disruptive or unlawful civic action is that it can itself enhance broad deliberative processes. Due to deep and persistent structural inequalities, some issues and voices are likely to be excluded from the ‘normal’ deliberative avenues of the public sphere (e.g. mass media). As such, other types of interventions are necessary in order to put an item on the public agenda and stimulate political dialogue. Put simply, Habermas is supportive of contentious politics of social movements to the extent that they are ways of facilitating public conversation.

For Habermas, while citizens can try to influence discursive processes they cannot and should not actually seek to govern themselves directly. Citizens can “thematize” and “dramatize” problems, but only in an effort to have them “taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes” (*ibid.* 359), or to bring them “into the core of the political system [to] receive formal consideration” (*ibid.* 381). While civil society can play a role in shaping discourse and influencing formalized decision-making, “in no way does it occupy *the position* of a macrosubject supposed to bring society as a whole under control and simultaneously act for it” (*ibid.* 372). Therefore, people can try to influence formal procedures of government, but they cannot *act* in the sense of making decisions independently of those procedures and carrying them out. Citizens can speak, but not act; they can influence, but not decide.

#### *Dean and the Need for Left Politics Beyond Democracy*

For Jodi Dean (2009, 22), the deliberative ideal has become a “democracy that talks without responding.” Perversely, the abundance (to use Dean’s term) of messages and communications today actually renders the Habermasian ideal of reaching understanding moot. The non-stop stream of information and opinion makes us all feel like we are participating, like our voices are being heard. However, “[u]nder communicative capitalism...messages are

contributions to circulating content – not actions to elicit responses...A contribution need not be understood; it only need be repeated, reproduced, forwarded” (*ibid.* 26-27). That anyone with a computer or a phone can share their opinion with the world, does not a deliberative democracy make. More important, though, than Dean’s criticism of deliberative politics in the context of communicative capitalism, though, is her identification of a far more pervasive problem in democratic theory: the identification of democracy with deliberation. Whether one has in mind orderly reason-giving or more contentious communicative acts, the result of seeing democracy as primarily discursive is “the reduction of politics to communicative acts, to speaking and saying and exposing and explaining, a reduction key to democracy conceived in terms of discussion and deliberation...[D]oing is reduce to talking, to contributing to the media environment” (*ibid.* 32).

For Dean, this reduction of democracy “speaking and saying and exposing and explaining” has serious consequences for left politics. Believing democracy to be synonymous with communication, she argues that activists have placed too much emphasis on the wrong activities. Discussion, education and consciousness-raising – important as they may be – are *not* equivalent to democracy, nor are they sufficient to make political change.

That people know what corporations and governments are doing doesn’t mean they can change them. That they are aware of a problem, have an opinion, and make their opinion known doesn’t mean they have developed the infrastructure necessary to write new legislation, garner support for it, and get it passed, much less carry out a revolution (*ibid.* 32).

Instead, left politics is reduced to MoveOn style “clicktivism,” wherein “all one has to do is contribute – an opinion, a signature, or money” (*ibid.* 46).

On my reading, Dean argues that rather than “speaking truth to (or about) power”, the left needs to (re)learn how to actually exercise power.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, what is missing from this conception

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<sup>15</sup> More specifically, Dean suggests that the left should focus on “occupying military bases, taking over the government, or abandoning the Democratic Party and doing the steady, persistent, organizational work or

of democracy – and, more particularly, from this brand of left politics – is an understanding of power, both in regards to the prevalence of existing power asymmetries and in regards to social movement strategies that generate collective power. The popular conception of democracy as centered on communicative acts between equals has reduced the capacity of the left to “take a stand” for something and use collective power against the institutionalized power of state and capital. Instead, much of the left is stuck in the “nonposition” (*ibid.* 47) of advocating “more information, more participation, more deliberation” (*ibid.* 93) in the name of advancing democracy. While communicative and educative efforts are doubtlessly essential elements of any social change efforts, they stop short of enactments of collective power that might actually bring the change to fruition (though, as will become clear, I have sharp differences with Dean about the form and content of these enactments of collective power). Moreover, from Dean’s perspective, such claims to “democracy” – at least insofar as democracy is understood as an inclusive conversation – are disingenuous, “a way of avoiding the true, partisan position” inherent in protest. Organizers “don’t really want an inclusive conversation. They want organized political resistance, but they don’t say this directly, shielding themselves from taking responsibility for the divisiveness of politics” (*ibid.* 84). In short, “ideals of inclusion and participation” have been accommodated by, and “capture resistance” to, neoliberal capitalism (*ibid.* 2). Thus, a left politics in opposition to neoliberalism will need to reach beyond the deliberative and communicative framework – a move that, on Dean’s view, entails reaching beyond democracy itself.

However, Dean is wrong to reduce democracy to deliberation. After all, given that democracy clearly predates neoliberalism, democracy cannot *just* be a “neoliberal fantasy,” a fact

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revitalizing the Greens or Socialists” (*ibid.* 32-33). What all of these disparate tactics have in common is their orientation toward actions that alter power relations, rather than (primarily) seeking to deliberate or communicate.

that Dean clearly appreciates but doesn't dwell on: "communicative capitalism...*repurposes* democratic ideals and aspirations in ways that strengthen and support globalized neoliberalism (*ibid.* 17; emphasis added). If neoliberalism has repurposed democracy according to its own image, then perhaps democracy can be repurposed according to a different image, as well. Though Dean (*ibid.* 35) chastises the anti-authoritarian left for abandoning the state to "conservative strategists," she curiously reproduces the exact same dynamic with regard to democracy: she advocates that the left abandon democracy, thus allowing the left's opponents to define democracy however they like. As a result, Dean sees Leninism (or some variant thereof) as the only viable, hard-nosed alternative to the communicative wishy-washiness that she rightly condemns.

Interestingly, Dean, like many of the deliberative theorists she criticizes, wrongly sees democracy and enactments of collective power as opposed. As an example, consider Dean's analysis of Occupy Wall Street. She incisively critiques efforts to "democratize" Occupy Wall Street – that is, to...

...frame the movement in terms of American electoral politics" and to advise "the movement to pursue any number of legislative paths, seek constitutional amendments to deny corporations personhood, change campaign finance laws, and abolish the Federal Reserve Bank (Dean 2011, 89).

Her main objection is that such a move obscures what people were actually doing: occupying space. In other words, "democratization skips the actual fact of occupation" (*ibid.* 89). On Dean's account, "occupation is not a democratic strategy" because it involves: "rejecting democratic institutions, breaking the law, disrupting public space, squandering public resources, and attempting to assert the will of a minority of vocal protesters outside of and in contradiction to democratic procedures" (*ibid.* 90). For Dean, it seems that power and democracy are opposed

– actions involving the enactment of collective power are, on her view, not democratic. It is this contention I wish to challenge.

What if occupation could be understood as reframing our understanding of the content of democratization? What if those “institutions” and “procedures” are not rightly seen as democratic, but the practice of occupation is? What if occupation can be defended on democratic grounds, without watering down this undeniably “militant and divisive tactic” (*ibid.* 90)? While the general assembly may be guilty of believing that the solution to our problems is simply “more information, more participation, more deliberation” (*ibid.* 93), the occupation of space is not so guilty. At least one element of Occupy that made it so exciting was that the act of occupation was simultaneously a rejection of the idea that we just need more of the same and an assertion of collective power on a large-scale.

While Dean laments “the left’s withdrawal from the State” (*ibid.* 35) and argues for “reclaiming the state as a force to be used against neoliberalism” (*ibid.* 47), I argue for non-statist alternatives to the left’s current malaise – alternatives that, additionally, do not require that we abandon democracy, but instead contest and reframe what democratic practice looks like. Whereas Dean uses her critique of deliberative democracy’s communicative fantasies in order to displace democracy, I take her analysis in a different direction. In particular, I argue that the anarchist practice of direct action can constitute the sort of political force Dean seeks, without reverting to a state-centric politics or abandoning a democratic normative framework. As we will see, however, this will require a reevaluation of democracy itself, one that foregrounds the concepts of action and power. In the next section, I explain the practice of direct action as it has evolved within the anarchist tradition, highlighting its disruptive and prefigurative capacities. In the subsequent sections, incorporating theorists of radical democracy and insights from

contemporary practitioners of direct action, I articulate the democratic potentials of direct action politics.

### **III. Defining Direct Action**

#### *Anarchism and the Politics of Direct Action*

Though I position direct action as a practice conducive to radical democracy, its theory and practice come primarily from the anarchist tradition.<sup>16</sup> Emma Goldman (1910, 369), for example, writes:

Anarchism...stands for direct action, the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws and restrictions, economic social and moral. But defiance and resistance are illegal. Therein lies the salvation of man. Everything illegal necessitates integrity, self-reliance and courage. In short, it calls for free independent spirits, for men who are men, and who have a bone in their back which you cannot pass your hand through.

While Goldman nicely captures the rebellious spirit at the heart of direct action, her definition is too broad. Not all forms of defiance and resistance to laws and norms constitute direct action and it is important to distinguish the uniqueness of direct action in contrast to other forms of oppositional action. If anarchism is committed to the idea that communities are capable of managing their affairs without recourse to states, direct action – by which people aim to accomplish their goals directly – is the positive complement to this anti-statism.

Anarchists reject states and all those systematic forms of inequality that states make possible. They do not seek to pressure the government to institute reforms. Neither do they seek to seize state power for themselves. Rather they wish to destroy that power, using means that are – so far as possible – consistent with their ends...Direct action is perfectly consistent with this, because in its essence direct action is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free (Graeber 2009, 203).

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<sup>16</sup> There are exceptions to this. Thomas Jefferson (1829, 275; emphasis added), in fact, used the concept of “direct action” as early as 1816, though it I do not believe he intended the same meaning as anarchist thinkers. “Were I to assign to [the term ‘republic’] a precise and definite idea, I would say that, purely and simply, it means a government by its citizens in mass, acting directly and personally, according to rules established by the majority: and that every other government is more or less republican, in proportion as it has in its compositions, more or less of this ingredient of the *direct actions* of its citizens.”

Graeber continues, highlighting the unique way that direct actionists aim to embody the end they seek in the means they use:

[D]irect action represents an ideal – in its purest form, probably unattainable. It is a form of action in which means and ends become, effectively, indistinguishable; a way of actively engaging with the world to bring about change, in which the form of the action – or at least the organization of the action – is itself a model for the change one wishes to bring about. At its most basic, it reflects a very simple anarchist insight: one cannot create a free society through military discipline, a democratic society by giving orders, or a happy one through joyless self-sacrifice (Graeber 2009, 210).

Thus, when landless peasants in Brazil protest their situation by occupying and farming unused land, as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) has done for years, they are engaged in direct action. When the Direct Action Network challenged the undemocratic nature of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, they utilized the very forms of decentralized and directly democratic decision-making they hoped would replace the WTO.<sup>17</sup>

Usefully, Rob Sparrow explains direct action through the lens of power, characterizing it as a form of action that involves the enactment of collective power.

Direct action aims to achieve our goals through our own activity rather than through the actions of others. It is about people *taking power for themselves*. In this it is distinguished from most other forms of political action...[that] aim to get others to achieve our goals for us. Such forms of action operate on a tacit acceptance of our own powerlessness. They concede that we ourselves have neither the right nor the power to affect change...Direct action is not only a method of protest but also a way of 'building the future now'...Any situation where people organize to extend control over their own circumstances without recourse to capital or state constitutes direct action (Sparrow n.d.; emphasis added).

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that some observers deny that the WTO shut-down was an act of direct action because "the means [were not] immediately also the ends" and because the protesters ultimately aimed to "influence the powers-that-be by way of some imagined 'public opinion,' rather than accomplishing their goals directly (Beyer-Anderson 2000, 11-12). Clearly, however, this view clashes the view of many social movement actors, including the Direct Action Network, who organized the WTO protests. In this paper, I take a more inclusive view of direct action: the means and ends must not always be identical (this is just an ideal), nor must direct action completely eschew a role for shaping "public opinion" – however, fictitious such a thing is – as part of a social change strategy.



In this sense, direct action occurs when people, by stepping outside of legally sanctioned modes of redress, claim their own power and simultaneously subvert presumptions about who has power in the first place. Direct action entails situations in which actors ‘take matters into their own hands’ or “do it ourselves,” so to speak. Rather than asking or demanding that a power-holder do something, citizens do it themselves – whether the ‘it’ is blocking the distribution of oil, preventing a shipment of weapons, housing people in an unused building, or constructing a community garden in a vacant lot. Because direct action “bypasses established political channels to accomplish objectives directly” (CrimethInc. n.d.), the practice of direct action should be distinguished from other sorts of political activity such as lobbying, petition-drives, rallies and demonstrations, all of which appeal to power-holders – such as government officials, corporate executives, landlords and police – and ask or demand that they change a law, policy or social structure. In contrast, “[e]xamples of Direct Action include blockades, pickets, sabotage, squatting, tree spiking, lockouts, occupations, rolling strikes, slowdowns, the revolutionary general strike...establishing our own organizations such as food co-ops and community access radio and TV” (Sparrow n.d.).

In this sense, direct action is a kind of “self-authorizing” action, an expression of political freedom that is authorized only by the participants in the action themselves. “[T]his is an intersubjective authorization: each of us acting in public authorizes the others, confirming and demonstrating...that we all have political freedom, that we all have the capacity and the right to shape the world in which we live” (Ferguson 2012, 156). Whereas government officials or property owners are authorized by political or legal processes to make decisions over a given space or issue, direct action involves people making (or attempting to make) a decision they are not officially authorized to make. Unlike other forms of political action that ask or demand

authorities to make a certain decision, direct action claims that it is not the authorities' decision to make at all.

### *The Two Sides of Direct Action: Disruption and Prefiguration*

I propose to distinguish two sides or dimensions of direct action, both of which are hinted at, but not adequately distinguished in the above quotes about and examples of direct action. The first side of direct action, I will characterize as *disruptive* direct action. We can see this conceptualization of direct action in phrases such as “open defiance” for Goldman, “destroy [state] power” for Graeber, and “a form of protest” for Sparrow, as well as in the examples of blocking weapons shipments and tree spiking. Disruptive direct action involves interventions on the established order that attempt to temporarily interrupt or permanently halt the operations of existing authorities. In this sense, “[d]irect action is...generally understood as a means for people to exert pressure on governments or other powerful institutions such as business corporations” through “tax refusal, strikes and boycotts, or by challenges to particular laws...or acts of physical obstruction” (Carter 2005, 3).<sup>18</sup> The shutdown of the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999 is perhaps the best known, large-scale example of disruptive direct action in recent memory.

The second side of direct action I will characterize as *prefigurative* direct action. We can see this conceptualization of direct action in phrases such as “integrity, self-reliance and courage” for Goldman, “acting as if one is already free” for Graeber, “building the future now” for Sparrow, as well as in the examples of constructing a community garden and establishing

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<sup>18</sup> While Carter's book is useful in that it puts direct action in conversation with democracy (as I hope to do in this chapter), in my view she strays too far from the core meaning of direct action and, as a result, is willing to say that “purely symbolic protest, such as rallies, marches and vigils...are usually associated with direct action” and that “[a]ctivists are quite often engaging in symbolism rather than expecting to achieve their goal immediately.” (3) (Carter 2005, 3). In my view, she is overly willing to collapse direct action into other forms of (more symbolic) collective action – a move that unfortunately occludes the unique insights direct action holds for democratic theory.

community access radio and TV. Prefigurative direct action involves interventions that aim to address a need, solve a problem or create something new through actions that are a) unmediated by formal processes or existing authorities and b) aim to model a possible future society in the present (as the famous Industrial Workers of the World slogan goes, to “build the new world in the shell of the old”). “[P]ractising prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the *present* towards a goal in the *future*; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present” (Maeckelbergh 2009, 66-67). From this perspective, direct action can be seen as a constructive power that people have when they join together to shape the world by acting directly to build the institutions and relationships they wish to see. The factory takeover movement that emerged in Argentina during the 2001 economic crisis, in which laid off workers occupied and self-managed their workplaces, offers an example of prefigurative direct action (Sitrin 2006). The workers’ end goal of finding stable, meaningful and democratic work is the simultaneously the means for achieving it.

While I think it is useful to distinguish disruptive and prefigurative direct action, there are often significant overlaps between these two forms of direct action and direct actions, in practice, often combine both disruptive and prefigurative elements. A primarily disruptive direct action may also foster opportunity for prefigurative politics and, conversely, a primarily prefigurative direct action may tend toward the development of a disruptive politics. The previously mentioned WTO protests exemplify this dynamic. While the ostensible goal of the Direct Action Network was to shut down the WTO’s meetings, the protests provided an opportunity to practice and propagate techniques of decentralized, direct democracy. As Starhawk (2002, 405) describes it,

The participants in the action were organized into small units called affinity groups. Each group was empowered to make its own decisions on how it would

participate in the blockade...Affinity groups were organized into clusters. The area around the Convention Center was broken down into thirteen sections, and affinity groups and clusters were committed to hold particular sections...No centralized leader could have coordinated the scene in the midst of the chaos, and none was needed – the organic, autonomous organization we had proved far more powerful and effective.

As a result, thousands of people were able to utilize a model of decision-making that not only proved effective at disrupting the WTO meeting, but also prefigured the type of organization of society many of the protesters envisioned as replacing the hierarchical system of global capitalism. For Graeber (2004, 84):

When protesters in Seattle chanted ‘this is what democracy looks like,’ they meant to be taken literally. In the best tradition of direct action, they not only confronted a certain form of power, exposing its mechanisms and attempting to literally stop it in its tracks: they did it in a way which demonstrated why the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary...[T]he decentralized form of organization...*was* the movement’s ideology.

For Carter (2005, xi) this relationship between disruptive and prefigurative direct action applies more generally:

Direct action is usually a response to some kind of democratic deficit and a sense of powerlessness...But direct action is at the same time a form of democratic empowerment. Direct action movements tend to generate their own ideas and practices of democracy, both in planning resistance and in creating alternative institutions as part of this resistance, so promoting forms of direct democracy.

Insofar as direct action is practiced as a form of self-directed disruption of power, it also tends to foster opportunities for the prefigurative and creative side of direct action, as well. Indeed, the best examples of direct action combine both the disruptive and prefigurative dimensions. However, I think it is useful to maintain an analytical distinction between them, for two reasons. The first is a practical matter: activists will often employ the term direct action, even if only one dimension of direct action is present. The second reason is more theoretical: these two dimensions of direct action present unique challenges to democratic theory, require a

different set of arguments and theoretical engagements, and as such, are usefully thought about separately (even though they often appear simultaneously in practice). In general, I propose that we think about direct action as the enactment of collective power, outside of official processes and unauthorized by formal authorities, in ways that aim to model a political imaginary.

### *Resisting the Move to Make Direct Action “Safe”*

Having provided a general account of direct action as it has developed, largely within the anarchist tradition, I want to briefly note and critique a move by April Carter in her (2005) *Direct Action and Democracy Today*. Carter approaches the concept of direct action from outside of the anarchist tradition and attempts to conceptualize direct action in order to make the concept safer for liberal democracy. For example, she explicitly defines direct action as “essentially nonviolent methods of noncooperation, obstruction or defiance” (*ibid.* 1), thus problematically writing out the possibility that direct action could involve “violence.” First, in defining direct action as “essentially nonviolent,” Carter tightly links the question of direct action to the violence/nonviolence dichotomy. Readers may have noticed that I have avoided building (non)violence into my discussion of direct action. The reason for this is straight-forward: the practice of direct action, as a concept, is agnostic toward the question of violence – that is, it neither requires, nor condemns violence *a priori*. Practitioners of direct action often reject the violence/nonviolence dichotomy entirely, arguing instead for a diversity of tactics.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that one cannot argue for or against particular instances of direct action as being “good” or “bad,” “revolutionary” or “counter-revolutionary,” “democratic or “anti-democratic.” However,

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<sup>19</sup> “I am not an advocate of violence, and neither is anyone else I know within the anarchist and anti-authoritarian movement. We are advocates of a diversity of tactics, of the full range of tactics that will effectively lead to a revolution...As such, we should be called, and call ourselves, proponents of revolutionary activism” (Gelderloos 2005, 4). Moreover, Gelderloos (*ibid.* 100), argues that there is no nonviolent option, -- that, in short, “nonviolence” is not nonviolent: “The global system and everyone in it are soaked in violence; it is enforced, coerced, involuntary...Our options [are]: actively supporting the violence of the system; tacitly supporting that violence by failing to challenge it;...or pursuing new and original ways to *fight and destroy* that system.”

what makes something direct action is not the presence (or absence) of violence. In short, there is neither a principled nor a historical reason for *defining* direct action in this way. Carter claims, for example, that “direct action can...be distinguished absolutely from planting bombs and assassination attempts” (*ibid.* 8). However, she provides absolutely no basis for making this distinction. That is, she provides no reason *why* such actions are “absolutely” not cases of direct action, giving this reader the impression that she defines direct action so as to only include actions she approves of, or that are otherwise basically compatible with liberal rights and/or the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence. Thus, while many contemporary activists use the term direct action to distinguish militant from passive resistance or to denote a commitment to diversity of tactics rather than strict nonviolence (Graeber 2009, 204-211), my point is that the level of militancy or violence is not the defining feature of direct action and that it does not make sense to write out the possibility that direct action can ever be violent.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Carter goes further: she contends that direct action does not involve “force.” Specifically, she argues that the “move towards more coercive and confrontational modes of direct action does not...mean that direct action normally includes use of force” (*ibid.* 7). This is a strange claim to make for two reasons. First, “coercive and confrontational modes of direct action” appear throughout the historical examples of direct action that she herself provides (e.g. anarcho-syndicalist labor struggles, the anti-war movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the environmental movement in the 1990s and the anti-globalization/anti-capitalist movement during the late 1990s and 2000s). Thus, it is not new that direct action involves confrontational and forceful actions. Secondly, even many adherents to strictly nonviolent forms of direct action understand successful nonviolent action as a kind of force. Take, for example, Ackerman and

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<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that such direct actions are necessarily democratic or normatively desirable. Here I am simply trying to develop an account of direct action that I put in conversation with democratic theory later in the paper.

Duvall's (2000) classic account of 20<sup>th</sup> century nonviolent movements, which bears the title *A Force More Powerful*. I would go so far as to claim that a defining feature of direct action compared with other forms of protest, is precisely that it does involve a force of some kind. Direct action, as I have elaborated, means to intervene in some social space and change it immediately, if only temporarily. Without permission or authorization from others, direct action blocks roads and denies the ability of (at least some) others from moving. Direct action squats unused buildings and informs those that legally own the property that they no longer have access. Direct action takes over factories and asserts ownership over the materials therein. Direct action occupies land and uses it for a different purpose. Direct action invades others' meetings and claims a place at the table, if not overturning the table entirely.

I appreciate why Carter worries about defining direct action this way. Her approach no doubt makes the project of reconciling direct action and democracy more straight-forward. If direct action involves neither violence nor force, then direct action is compatible with liberal rights and the liberal democratic state. As Carter (*ibid.* 33) puts it, "if direct action by one community flagrantly violates the rights of members of another...it is indefensible." This is a convenient way to dismiss the possibility that direct action will be used for what she calls "illiberal causes" such as "when Israeli settlers occupy the homes and land of Palestinians" or the Chilean truck driver's strike in 1972 that sought to destabilize Salvador Allende's elected socialist government (*ibid.* 32-33). However, it is insufficient. After all, it is not just those advocating "illiberal causes" that violate people's rights. All of the examples given in the above paragraph violate people's rights. When protesters blocked WTO delegates from getting to their meetings or striking workers block scabs from getting onto the worksite, these are also rights violations. Direct action often, perhaps even usually, involves violating some people's rights to

freedom of movement or control over private property; this is not an aberration, but a frequent occurrence. Does Carter mean to say that none of the above examples of direct action are “defensible”? If so, then I begin to wonder if her book is misnamed, as it is no longer a defense of direct action. Moreover, by trying to conceptualize direct action so that it is relatively unproblematic for liberal rights framework,<sup>21</sup> Carter ends up watering down direct action and losing its distinctiveness. In trying to make direct action safe for liberal democracy, she loses much of what I see as the radically democratic potential of direct action. That direct action *is* an enactment of power, that it *does* typically involve a force of some kind, no doubt makes it a dangerous practice: it can be used in reactionary and anti-democratic ways. Without denying that possibility, I hope to show that we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Along with the dangerous possibilities of direct action are radically democratic ones, as well. Thus, rather than seeking to judge specific instances of direct action, my aim is to show how, at least in certain circumstances, direct action can be a vital democratic practice. If Carter moderates the meaning of direct action so as to make it compatible with our basic understanding of democracy, I take a reverse strategy: to maintain the radical meaning of direct action so as to problematize and call for a change in our understanding of democracy.

In the following sections, I defend both the disruptive and prefigurative dimensions of direct action on democratic grounds. The first conception or use of direct action has democratic

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<sup>21</sup> In my view the correct metric for evaluating whether any particular direct action is democratic has less to do with whether rights are violated (though, of course, serious rights violations might weigh against a direct action), and more to do with whether power inequalities are challenged or undone. Although I take some degree of rights violations to occur in many instances of direct action, I do not think that direct action has to be understood as wholly in opposition to rights. We might, for example, ask the question: “Do the democratizing effects of this action on the configuration of power in society (if any) outweigh the rights violations that resulted from this action?” Obviously, rights violations such as preventing freedom of movement, especially for a limited time, would be easier to justify than the taking someone’s life. Thus, someone who was committed to rights, I think, can still be supportive of certain instances of direct action. However, whereas rights are meant to be impartially applied, the power framework I discuss below suggests that who the person is matters. Rights violations of a WTO delegate headed to the meetings are more acceptable on this view than a Seattle resident heading to work, due their position in the relevant power hierarchy.



potential insofar as its challenges or upsets power relations that are incompatible with democracy's requirement for relative political equality. The second conception or use of direct action can be defended on democratic grounds insofar as it opens up space for people to be(come) political actors and exercise the political freedom to shape their world. If disruptive direct action is about *reconfiguring* power vertically, then prefigurative direct action is about *creating* power horizontally.

#### **IV. The Democratic Potential of Disruptive Direct Action**

Having outlined the practice of direct action within anarchist praxis, I now shift my focus toward its democratic potential. In this section, I argue that disruptive direct action – interventions on the established order that attempt to temporarily interrupt or permanently halt the operations of existing authorities – can bolster democracy and constitute an important democratic practice. First, using Iris Marion Young's critique of Habermas, I show why disruptive direct actions in the context of power inequalities, help to foster democracy. However, I argue that Young remains wedded to a communicative framework and, as a result, sees such disruptions in overly dialogical terms – as correctives to flawed deliberative institutions and ideals – rather than as (also) enactments of collective power. I then use Francis Fox Piven's argument about the role disruptive or interdependent power in enabling the *demos* to attain *kratia* throughout American history, as a way of reading Jacques Ranciere's work on the role of disruption and intervention as the essential democratic acts. Ultimately, I contend that this conception of disruptive action highlights power over communication and, as such, provides an alternative to the communicative politics critiqued by Dean above.

*Young's Critique of Habermas: Structural Inequality and Disruptive Communication*

Habermas (1996, 490) states that a “political culture that is egalitarian, divested of all educational privilege, and thoroughly intellectual” is the prerequisite for his theory of deliberative democracy. In this sense, Habermas is engaged in ideal theory and attempts to formulate a regulative ideal that democratic societies ought to strive for. While this is no doubt a worthy project, it is a mistake to take the prescriptions for civic action in an ideal society as wholly adequate for existing contemporary democracies. Unlike Habermas, Young attempts to elaborate a non-ideal theory of deliberative democracy. As Young (2000, 17) rightly points out: “ours is not the ideal society.” More specifically, she holds that all actually existing democracies are characterized by structural inequalities – “for example, inequalities of wealth, social and economic power, access to knowledge, status, work expectations...[that] produce or perpetuate institutional conditions which support domination or inhibit self-development” (*ibid.* 34). In a truly egalitarian culture and political economy, the open exchange and debate of competing ideas, guided by public reason, may well foster a most ideal democracy. Indeed, the “practices of deliberative democracy...aim to bracket the influence of power differentials in political outcomes because agreement between deliberators should be reached on the basis of argument, rather than as a result of threat or force” (Young 2001, 672).

However, as Young has demonstrated, it is not possible to simply “bracket” power differentials in the context of structural inequality. When asymmetries of power characterize the relationship between different individuals and organizations – a condition which holds in all real-world political communities – the mere presence of diverse discourses and means of communicating about them does not constitute democracy. The most well-founded and convincing discourses do not triumph in such a context, nor necessarily do the most popular.

Habermas' (1996, 306) "unforced force of the better argument" is no force at all. In inequitable contexts, the discourses that guide public policy are those with the most power behind them – whether that power is rooted in military force or financial flows. Moreover, there is certainly no guarantee that the decisions will reflect the interests or wishes of the citizens who participate in these dialogues, nor their reasoned judgments about what constitutes the strongest arguments. In such contexts, the normal processes of decision-making – even if they are formally democratic – are likely to reinforce inequalities insofar as "privileged people are able to marginalize the voices and issues of those less privileged" (*ibid.* 34).<sup>22</sup> Habermas is aware that there is a tension between his ideal theory, on the one hand, and the very real operations of power in the real world, on the other. He acknowledges that he must explain "how this procedural concept [the discourse approach to democracy], so freighted with idealizations, can link up with empirical investigations that conceive politics primarily as arena of power processes" (Habermas 1996, 287). In my view, however, he does not carry this investigation through.

In contrast, Young has argued persuasively that disruptive actions have a role in a viable theory of "communicative democracy" (Young 1996, 132) and is to be commended for aiming to "foreground the virtues of nondeliberative political practices" (2001, 670). She argues that "disorderliness is an important tool of critical communication aimed at calling attention to the unreasonableness of others" (2000, 49). And, further, "disorderly, disruptive, annoying, or distracting means of communication are often necessary or effective elements in...efforts to engage others in debate over issues and outcomes" (*ibid.* 50). Young usefully shows why, in the context of inequality, dominated and oppressed people will often need to rely on disruptive actions in order to put an issue on the agenda or gain a seat at the table. To state the claim more

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<sup>22</sup> Young (2001) goes into some detail in outlining how this marginalization occurs even in formally deliberative and inclusive institutions through mechanisms such as "constrained alternatives" and "hegemonic discourse."

strongly, Young provides reasons for thinking that sometimes the right way to “deliberate” – that is, to contribute to and participate in the process of critiquing and presenting ideas – is to disrupt formally deliberative processes.<sup>23</sup> As Young (2001, 673) notes:

Often activists make public noise outside when deliberation is supposedly taking place on the inside. Sometimes activists invade the houses of deliberation and disrupt their business by unfurling banners, throwing stink bombs, or running and shouting through the aisles.

In short, where the “unforced force of the better argument” fails – that is, where structural inequalities or other factors prevent reasonable outcomes – these activists force a conversation by shutting down a conversation. If democracy today talks without responding, as Dean suggests, disruptive direct action forces a response.

However, as is clear from Young’s analysis, she remains wedded to conceptualizing even disruptive action as primarily communicative. She urges democratic theorists to “conceive the exchange of ideas and processes of communication taking place in a vibrant democracy as far more rowdy, disorderly, and decentered” (*ibid.* 688). Even as Young pushes on deliberative democrats to see disruption as democratic, she sees the actions as primarily oriented toward communication. As such, the democratic justification for disruptive activities is that they further communicative goals, such as having one’s voice heard and improving the quality of conversations in the public sphere. For example, Young (*ibid.* 676) contends that one of the primary reasons for disruptive protests...

...is to make a wider public aware of institutional wrongs and persuade that public to join...in pressuring for change in the institutions. While not deliberative, then in the sense of engaging in orderly reason giving, most activist political engagements aim to *communicate* specific ideas to a wide public.

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<sup>23</sup> Take, for example, the rowdy and disruptive protests that shut down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999. There is no doubt that these protests effectively stopped a conversation from happening. However, the protests are frequently credited with initiating a serious public debate about and reconsideration of neoliberal globalization, as well as the role of corporations in society and politics. It is likely that without such disruptive protests, those critical issues would not have been raised and the public discussion – carried on through a wide variety of media outlets – would not have happened.

Certainly, she is not wrong that communicating ideas to a general public is an important goal of protest. However, it is not the only goal of protests in general and it is certainly not the only goal of direct action in particular.<sup>24</sup>

If direct action is to offer an alternative way out of the problem Dean has identified, I will need to show how direct action can be conceptualized in non-communicative terms and also why this type of action should still be theorized as democratic. To make this argument, I turn to Frances Fox Piven and Jacques Ranciere, who provide distinct, but related accounts of disruptive democratic action that is best understood as being oriented toward reconfiguring power, rather than reinvigorating conversation.

*Reading Ranciere with Piven: Interdependency and (In)Equality*

In this and the next subsection, I use two theorists to develop an account of disruptive action – one from the perspective of an American empirical social scientist and one from the French philosophical tradition – that is simultaneously democratic and not reducible to communication. On my reading, both begin from an interestingly similar presupposition: the presupposition of interdependency for Piven and the presupposition of equality for Ranciere. For Piven, the power of disruption is inherent in the webs of interdependency that undergird social life and, importantly, this power can be activated by those on the lower end of the vertical power relations.

All societies organize social life through networks of specialized and interdependent activities, and the more complex the societies, the more elaborate these interdependent relations....Agricultural workers depend on landowners, but landowners also depend on agricultural workers, just as industrial capitalists depend on workers, the prince depends in some measure on the urban crowd,

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<sup>24</sup> Although Young (2001, 673) specifically addresses direct action, she (much like Carter) essentially collapses direct action into the broader category of protest: “picketing, leafleting, guerillatheater, large and loud street demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of direct action, such as boycotts.” She does not, in other words, adopt the more nuanced and anarchistic understanding of direct action advanced in this paper. Because she does not identify any differences between “protest” and “direct action” she does not appreciate the ways that direct action goes beyond communicative politics.

merchants depend on customers, husbands depend on wives, masters depend on slaves, [and] landlords depend on tenants... (Piven 2006, 20).

Those who are usually thought to have power through their control over material wealth and military force, also depend on the contributions and cooperation of the “powerless.” Thus, disruption is “a power strategy that rests on withdrawing cooperation in social relations” (Piven 2006, 23). Workers and students withdraw cooperation when they strike, tenants and consumers withdraw cooperation when they refuse to pay, and the marginalized withdraw cooperation when they reject norms of civility and riot. For Piven, it is precisely in these instances of disruption – from the American Revolution, to the Abolitionist movement, to 20<sup>th</sup> century labor and civil rights movements – “that produce the democratic moments in American political development” (*ibid.* 2).

Ranciere pursues a similar line of argument, albeit from a rather different angle and with somewhat more theoretical baggage, which requires a bit of unpacking. For Ranciere, any social order characterized by inequality – which is to say every social order – is built on an unsteady foundation: the fact of equality.

There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you. It is this equality that gnaws away at any natural order...In the final analysis, inequality is only possible through equality (Ranciere 1999, 16-17).

Thus, “the ultimate equality on which any social order rests” (*ibid.* 16) can be read as establishing a similar perspective as Piven’s interdependency. While Piven identifies the few’s interdependence on the many to remain in control, Ranciere identifies the few’s reliance on the basic and real equality of the many, in order to enforce a social order of inequality. The twin facts of interdependency and equality – which are, at the same time, socially necessary and

necessarily destabilizing – provide the foundation for each thinker’s conception of the democratic potential of disruptive direct action. Allow me to briefly work through Ranciere’s argument by explaining why he sees disruption as the prototypical democratic act, then return to Piven to show why this view requires (against Ranciere’s own inclinations) a theory of democratic power or force.

*Reading Ranciere with Piven: Toward a Theory of Democratic Force*

What is commonly referred to as ‘politics’ – “the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution” (Ranciere 1999, 28) – Ranciere proposes to call “the police.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, ‘the police’ refers to: 1) the organization of any political economy; 2) the distribution of people within that political economy and the expectations, rights, responsibilities and powers appropriate to the different positions within that distribution; 3) the ways that the organization and distribution is legitimated and justified. These are, obviously, not unimportant questions, but issues that Ranciere wishes to separate from ‘politics’ proper. Indeed, Ranciere reads much of the Western political philosophy, beginning with Plato’s division of the ideal city into three classes, continuing through Hobbes and including contemporary theorists of distributive justice (May 2008, 41-46) as projects more closely relating to “policing” than to “politics.” They are projects to organize,

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<sup>25</sup> May (2008, 41-42) suggests that, by police, Ranciere does not (just) mean “armed men in uniforms” but a broader and somewhat Foucauldian conception of policing: “the regulation of and concern for the health and productivity of the lives of a state’s citizens...ensuring a population’s well-being in order that a state may thrive.” Ranciere (1999, 28) himself notes that the “petty police is just a particular form of a more general order...it is the weakness and not the strength of this order in certain states that inflates the petty police to the point of putting it in charge of the whole set of police functions.”

maintain and justify some social order, with a specific configuration of power and specific distribution of goods.<sup>26</sup>

Conversely “politics,” as Ranciere understands it, is not only separate from but, by definition, in opposition to the police: politics is “an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing” (Ranciere 1999, 29). Politics is defined as an opposition to or “the rupture of the ‘normal’ distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it” (Ranciere 2001, 3). Put starkly, politics does not refer to the power to rule, but rather interruptions of and interventions upon that power. “Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of the part of those who have no part” (Ranciere 1999, 11). The actors in politics are, therefore, the “part of those who have no part” – that is, those persons that exist within the boundaries of the community, but who are not recognized as being capable of participating in ruling that community. The “part of those who have no part” includes anyone who is an essential part of an institution without being seen as having a voice within that institution: slaves in the ancient Athens, ‘illegal’ immigrants in America, workers in a capitalist firm, queer youth in conservative churches, young black men in the Parisian suburbs, ordinary people within international climate change policy. In short, politics occurs when the excluded, marginalized and dominated interrupt the police order through self-authorized collective action. In Ranciere’s (*ibid.* 16-17) words:

Politics occurs because, or when, the natural order of the shepherd king, the warlords, or property owners is interrupted by a freedom that crops up and makes

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<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that Ranciere does not necessarily see the police order as a bad to be overthrown (that is, as something that can or should be entirely replaced by politics) or as a topic that is unworthy of theoretical engagement. “There is a worse and a better police...The police can procure all sorts of goods, and one kind of police may be infinitely preferable to another. This does not change the nature of the police...Whether the police is sweet and kind does not make it any less the opposite of politics” (Ranciere 1999, 31). While politics and policing are opposites, Ranciere suggests that “politics” actually requires the “police”: “Politics occurs when there is a place and a way for two heterogeneous processes to meet. The first is the police process...The second is the process of equality” (*ibid.* 30). And, further, “if politics implements a logic entirely heterogeneous to that of the police, it is always bound up with the latter. The reason is simple: politics has not objects or issues of its own” (*ibid.* 31).



real the ultimate equality on which any social order rest...Politics only occurs when these mechanisms [“the exercise of majesty, the curacy of divinity, the command of armies, and the management of interests”] are stopped in their tracks by the effect of a presupposition [of equality] that is totally foreign to them yet without which none of them could function...

The activation of society’s “ultimate equality,” is thus similar to the activation of disruptive/interdependent power: both are always present in society, but are only occasionally activated, and it is only when they are activated that democratic politics occurs.

It now remains to be shown how these disruptive actions are not entirely reducible to communicative acts and, as such, why they should push theorists and activists alike to reorient our view of democracy toward power, rather than just communication. On this point, Ranciere is less clear than Piven. On the one hand, he argues that politics involves “whatever breaks with the tangible configuration” of the social order, a break that “is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure space. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination” (*ibid.* 29-30). The language of tangibility, bodies, and the reconfiguration of space suggests, at least, an emphasis on a kind of materiality that is often omitted from communicative approaches to democracy. On the other hand, in Ranciere, there is a great emphasis on the discursive elements of political action and even, according to May (2008, 58) a “privileging of speech.” Much of his analysis is framed in terms of the capacity for speech (which he begins with on the first page of *Disagreement*) and the shared capacity for speech is used as his simple justification for the basic condition of equality, discussed above. Further, he contends that “political activity is always a mode of expression” that “makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise” (*ibid.* 30). In fleshing out the nature of “politics,” Ranciere returns to a “dialogue” between a judge and revolutionary regarding whether the accused revolutionary could identify

his profession as “proletariat” (*ibid.* 38-39). Without getting into the specifics of the exchange, it is noteworthy that Ranciere uses a dialogical event to characterize “politics.” Moreover, he argues that the naming of a class that is not recognized as class – the making plain of a “miscount” by an appearance of a subject that had been rendered invisible by the “partition of the sensible” – is the exemplary political act. This all suggests some ambivalence in Ranciere’s thought regarding the extent to which “politics” is essentially communicative.

What is clear is that, for Ranciere, politics is not communicative in the typical sense. As May (2008, 49) reads Ranciere, “a democratic politics is the appearance of that which has been excluded. This is an intervention not a discussion...Democratic politics manifests a people...it creates a political subject. It is not a conversation among subjects.” In this sense, democratic action is a mode of creating subjects, in particular the self-creation of subjectivity among the part that has no part. “This is precisely why politics cannot be identified with the [Habermasian] model of communicative action since this model presupposes the partners in communicative exchange to be pre-constituted” (Ranciere 2001, par. 24). While Ranciere distances himself from deliberative democrats and communicative theories, he does not, as I do, reorient his perspective to power, but rather toward subjectification.

Ranciere, I believe, sees “subjectification” and “power” as two very different things. His first thesis on politics, for example, states that: “Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined on its own terms, as a mode of acting put into practice by a specific kind of subject...It is a political relationship that allows one to think the possibility of a political subject(ivity), not the other way around” (Ranciere 2001, par.1). It seems clear then, that on his account, politics is properly understood as involving subjectification, not power. I propose that it is impossible (or, at least, unhelpful) to understand the former, without appealing to the later. In

other words, power and subjectification are intertwined. While Ranciere (1999, 42) says that “politics is not made up of power relationships,” I don’t believe this is an intelligible claim, even from the perspective of his own theory. We cannot fully understand the actions that Ranciere himself discusses without the language of power. Consider the case of striking workers (an example to which Ranciere himself frequently alludes). Certainly, Ranciere is right that is a case in which “a part that has no part” reveals itself as a political subject and through its actions exposes the underlying equality on which the social order is based. But is the strike not also an enactment of power? More to the point, is it not precisely this exercise of power – the shutting down of production, in this case – that makes vivid the presence of a proletariat, where there were once just workers? Ranciere shows that a conversation between capitalist and proletariat is impossible because the capitalist does not recognize the existence of the proletariat. As such, an interruption or intervention (what I have been calling disruption) is necessary to demonstrate the reality of a subject. Ranciere fails, though, to see the disruption for what it is: an enactment of power. In this case, striking workers “expressed their equality in the way they could: by utilizing their *collective power* as workers in order to *force* a social recognition of what they already presupposed” (May 2008, 54; emphasis added). In other words, the distinguishing mark of the democratic actions that Ranciere endorses is that they *force* recognition, and perhaps even a reply, where there had not even been a conversation.

It is unclear to me why Ranciere so wishes to exorcise power from his conception of politics, especially given that the disruptions he discusses, strikes in particular, seem to so clearly involve power. I do not dispute Ranciere’s insight that politics is not about the use of or justification for the state’s monopoly on power. However, this does not mean his theory can, or should, eschew power or force entirely. Indeed, I think democratic theory is better served by

directly engaging with these concepts, putting them at the center of our understanding of democracy, rather than obscuring them and placing them at the margins. Like Young's analysis above, Ranciere is not wrong. His view is simply partial.

It is for this reason, that Piven's analysis is critical. She explicitly argues that the primary objective of disruptive protest, is not to communicate one's opinion, but to exercise collective power.

Protest movements do try to communicate their grievances, of course, with slogans, banners, antics, rallies, marches, and so on... The reverberations of disruptive actions, the shutdowns or highway blockages or property destruction, are inevitably also communicative. But *while disruption thus usually gives the protesters voice, voice alone does not give the protesters much power... In fact, the response of authorities to disruptive protests is frequently to profess to allow voice while preventing the disruption itself.* Thus the picket line, originally a strategy to physically obstruct the scabs who interfered with the shutdown of production, has been turned by the courts into an informational activity... (Piven 2006, 23-24; emphasis added).

While Piven is clear that communication and voice are certainly elements of even disruptive actions, that is not their exclusive, or even, principal goal. On this view, the "right to free speech," so often invoked as an example of liberties accorded American citizens, is actually used to transform and limit protest to "being heard" rather than exercising power. For example, during my participation in Occupy Denver, the police allowed sign-holding, marching and chanting so long as it remained on the sidewalk (a move that, sadly, some influential individuals within Occupy enforced) and thus did not block roads and potentially disrupt the activities of state and capital. In any case, the essential point from this analysis is that the activation of disruptive power – a phenomenon very closely related to, if not identical with disruptive direct action – is, for Piven, oriented toward the withdrawal of cooperation, with communication being only a secondary aim. Disruption is "*a power strategy that rests on withdrawing cooperation in social relations*" (*ibid.* 23; emphasis added). Thus, I contend that disruptive direct action is *not*

only about communication.<sup>27</sup> To characterize direct action as an effort to “having one’s voice heard” or “expressing one’s opinion” or “exchanging ideas” or “making political claims” – phrases that are often be associated with protest more generally – is to miss what is unique about direct action. It is about taking action, not talking, enacting power, rather than engaging in conversation.

Disruptive direct action is rightly considered democratic when it is an expression of what May (2008) has called “active equality.” On May’s view, Ranciere’s work highlights the active creation of equality through collective action.<sup>28</sup> Utilizing Ranciere’s work, May (*ibid.* 53) contends: “A democratic politics is a type of action. It is a collective action that starts from the presupposition of equality. It is...a form of active...equality.” On this view, the actions themselves express the equality. No amount of talking expresses the power that people have. Rather, it is what people do, rather than what they say, that creates equality. To put this differently, disruptive direct actions reconfigure power. If one measure of power is control over physical space or territory, as it surely is, then direct actions that occupy and repurpose spaces are a concrete (if only temporary) reconfiguration of power. For every Oakland street that the Black Panthers made inhospitable to the police, for every occupied foreclosed home that banks cannot resell, for every guerilla garden that inhibits a new gentrifying real estate development, power is reconfigured. The way that Ranciere and Piven theorize disruptive actions yields a particular logic as to when such actions are, in fact, democratic: disruptive power has democratic potential when it is mobilized by those lower on the power hierarchy in opposition to those

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<sup>27</sup> One aim of most direct actions is, without question, communication. However, the communicative function of direct action is generally to: a) communicate with others (who are already in basic political agreement about the goal) that one need not wait to start accomplishing the goal in question, and/or b) to actualize a threat to authorities. In either case, the point of such communication is not a Habermasian dialogue that promotes mutual understanding.

<sup>28</sup> Ranciere’s review on the back of May’s book expressly endorses this view, saying: “Equality is not something that we must expect from state institutions. It is something that we must both presuppose and create through collective action.”

higher on the power hierarchy. Said differently, disruptive direct action is democratic to the extent to which it reconfigures power in ways that *expose, upset, or reduce a power inequality*. A disruptive direct action would not be democratic to the extent that it serves to perpetuate, reinforce or establish a power inequality. In the chapter's concluding section, I discuss ways to amplify the democratic potential of direct actions in more detail. For the time being, let me say that, in contrast to both Habermas and Young, Ranciere and Piven theorize disruptive actions in ways that help expose these as not mere efforts to communicate, but also, and more importantly, as efforts to enact and, in doing so, reconfigure power.

## **V. The Democratic Potential of Prefigurative Direct Action**

### *The Reduction of Radical Democratic Politics to Resistance*

In the previous section, I argued that disruptive direct actions – actions that transcend communication and involve enactments of collective power – can have important democratic potential. However, to reduce direct action to disruptive protest – to acts of resistance – is to miss an element crucial to direct action: prefiguration. Indeed, what best distinguishes direct action from other forms of protest and collective action (aside from its aforementioned transcendence of communication) is its orientation toward creating a future in the present. I believe that the prefigurative side of direct action offers a way to theorize radical democracy that is not reduced to a politics of protest. Indeed, it is a mistake and a cop-out to reduce direct action to disruption. While theorists such as Ranciere and Piven offer a compelling account of why disruptive collective action – even when it extends beyond communication – are core democratic

practices, they say much less about what, if anything, ought to *replace* the “police” order.<sup>29</sup> Instead, democratic action is reduced to temporary moments of intervention and resistance.

Sheldon Wolin has perhaps given the clearest expression of this view: democracy can never function as a sustained political system or as mode of collective self-governance. History demonstrates that moments of democratic commonality are rare and, when they do occur, they are fleeting. Wolin argues that such an outcome is inevitable: “Democratic political interventions are, at the national level, necessarily episodic or fugitive” (Wolin 2008, 290). Though Wolin (1992, 251) acknowledges that participants in disruptive actions aim to create new norms – “bearing the markers of an obsession with participation and equality as well as an intoxication with the first experience of power, the experience of cooperation, common sacrifice, and common concern” – attempts to forge a lasting democratic practice are doomed. Thus, for Wolin, democracy is consigned to the fleeting moments in which citizens reassert themselves to challenge exclusion or injustice, or otherwise address an issue of common concern. As such, citizens are constantly stuck in the defensive position of trying to “recover lost ground” (Wolin 2008, 258). Disruptive democratic actions, then, are theorized as reactions and resistance.

As Dean (2009, 178, fn. 24) puts it in relationship to Ranciere’s thought:

If disruption is the essence of politics, then governance is necessarily depoliticizing. This view of governance allows for a kind of permanent contestation without any responsibility for actual decisions and implementation. The resulting left politics is reduced to a politics of resistance.

While I might eschew the language of “governance” as the only alternative to a language of “resistance,” I generally agree with her point. I believe that we both want to move left politics beyond a politics of resistance (without denying that disruption and resistance are critical) and

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<sup>29</sup> This is perhaps not a problem for Ranciere who conceptualizes the “police” as a necessary counterpart to “politics,” but it is a problem for anarchists and others like Dean who wish to not just intervene upon, but to change, the social order.

towards a positive vision of an alternative society. Contrary to Dean, however, I do not believe this requires that we abandon democracy. The way that direct action combines disruption and prefiguration offers a way out of this dilemma. To put this differently, I contend that radical democrats like Ranciere and Wolin have taken seriously the anarchic project of disruption and resistance, while neglecting, if not rejecting, anarchists' positive political commitments to the creation of a free, egalitarian and radically democratic society. Democracy, therefore, becomes a mere intervention on the 'police' order, rather than a radical (in the sense of advocating fundamental, social, economic and political change) vision of how to change the 'police' order itself. While Ranciere conceptualizes democracy in a way that foregrounds the *disruptive* dimension of direct action, Ranciere obscures the *prefigurative* dimensions of direct action. I propose to read Arendt as offering a view that captures the democratic potential of prefigurative direct action – a future-oriented practice that sees the enactment of collective and creative power as central to a vibrant democratic politics. If, "[i]nstitutionalization marks the attenuation of democracy" (Wolin 1996, 39), then perhaps one alternative to the cycle of resistance/institutionalization is to propagate the practice of prefiguration.

#### *Arendt, Prefiguration and Creative Power*

Arendt, like Ranciere and Piven, emphasizes the importance of collective action as the essential component of her democratic theory. Whereas Ranciere uses the language of politics, interruptions and disruptions to signal his commitments to the spontaneous collective action of citizens, Arendt uses the language of power and action. "[P]ower comes into being only if and when men (*sic*) join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another" (Arendt 1963, 166). Thus, the presence of power on Arendt's view is necessarily contingent on the "the gathering-together of people for



a specified political purpose” (*ibid.* 174). Beyond that, power involves action, specifically collective action. It is the experience of acting together, of exerting collective power, through which people become political beings. Moreover, the experience of this *power through action* moves people in fundamental ways. As an example, Arendt points to the American Founders and argues that they were initially motivated by the important, but limited desire to restore “the basic rights and liberties of limited government” (*ibid.* 146). Though the American Founders were initially focused on securing private freedoms, through the experience of acting together to secure those “modern” freedoms, they found that the exercise of public freedom was itself of the utmost importance. In reflecting on those tumultuous days, John Adams noted that “it is action, not rest, that constitutes our pleasure” (*ibid.* 24). The Founders discovered, in other words, that the true meaning of freedom could not be captured fully by rights and limited government, but entailed the experience of power that was created through collective action.

However, unlike Ranciere and Wolin, Arendt does not consign the power of collective action to a form of resistance, incapable of actually governing. While the two previously discussed thinkers focus on the collective power of citizens to resist, to intervene and to challenge existing power, Arendt’s citizens play a more constitutive role – collectivities have the power to institute, to establish and to enact. More specifically, Arendt argues that citizens can act together to create and to found the institutions of collective self-governance. “Political freedom...means the right ‘to be a participator in government,’ or it means nothing” (*ibid.* 210). The public freedom of acting together is not, for Arendt, necessarily episodic (though historically it often has been), nor is public freedom best understood as mere resistance. This is implicit in Arendt’s distinction between revolution and rebellion. Whereas revolution is aimed at the “constitution of freedom” (*ibid.* 25), that is, the establishment of an order in which people might

rule themselves, rebellion is purely negative: it is the people deciding “who should *not* rule them” (*ibid.* 30). In a rebellion, the people act as a check on their rulers, temporarily resisting egregious violations or injustices. The people rise up, but die back down, returning to their private lives, either exuberant from the successful realization of their power or defeated by a combination of exhaustion and repression. In a revolution, the people do not merely return to their private lives with their rights intact, but build a new order in which they actively rule themselves. “[T]he end of rebellion is liberation, while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom” (*ibid.* 133). In this sense, one can understand Ranciere and Wolin as theorists of rebellion and Arendt as a theorist of revolution. If we conceptualize direct action as a mode by which citizens not only intervene and interrupt power structures, but actually authorize themselves to decide and to act on issues of common concern, then Arendt goes further than either of these two contemporary radicals. She provides theoretical basis for conceiving of democratic self-governance as a form of common power and collective action.

In this respect, Arendt shares significantly more common ground with the anarchist-inspired practice of direct action than either Ranciere or Wolin for whom a ‘police’ order is the necessary counterpart – in fact, the normal state of affairs – to fleeting instances of democratic commonality.<sup>30</sup> If we hold that the basic positive claim of anarchists is that people are capable of collectively managing their own affairs, then Ranciere and Wolin seem clearly opposed to that

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that while Arendt acknowledges that classical anarchists such as Proudhon and Bakunin have highlighted the role of decentralized and participatory councils, she quickly dismisses the possibility that what she is discussing has any significant commonalities with anarchism. “[T]he truth is that these essentially anarchist political thinkers were singularly unequipped to deal with a phenomenon which demonstrated so clearly how a revolution did not end with the abolition of state and government but, on the contrary, aimed at the foundation of a new state and the establishment of a new form of government” (Arendt 1963, 253). This dismissal, however, is inadequate. Arendt fails to recognize that anarchists wish to draw a distinction between a system of councils, on the one hand, and a state or government, on the other. While the former are institutions by which people can manage their own affairs, the latter are the institutions whereby some – whether they are elected or not – rule others. The distinction between *governing* and *being governed* is so essential to Arendt’s own thought that it is astonishing she missed it.

claim. Arendt, on the other hand, does not. She laments what Ranciere and Wolin seem to celebrate – that citizens’ only option of public activity is to “preserve the spirit of resistance to whatever government they have elected, since the only power they retain is the ‘reserve power of revolution’” (*ibid.* 229). However, the failure to realize public freedom in America was not a foregone conclusion, as Ranciere and Wolin may be inclined to claim. On Arendt’s account, it is not that people become unable or uninterested in governing themselves, it is that the structures that would facilitate self-governance were not established.

The type of institutions or arrangements of power that Arendt believes fosters public freedom are wards or councils. Such councils have “made their appearance in every genuine revolution throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” springing up as the “spontaneous organs of the people” and amounting to nothing less than “an entirely new form of government, with a new public space for freedom which was constituted and organized during the course of the revolution itself” (*ibid.* 241). Arendt sees in moments of democratic upheaval a very real intention to turn spontaneously developed popular councils into organs of a new mode of collective self-governance. What is so noteworthy about the councils is the degree to which people organically adopt similar modes of organization and action. Whether in 1917 Russia, 1956 Hungary, 2001 Argentina, or 2011 across North Africa, Europe and North America, people have organized themselves in decentralized, participatory and egalitarian councils. Despite widely disparate political tendencies in all those situations, the form of organization itself was largely assumed. All of these councils were created through direct action. Direct actions were thus expressions of political freedom that created a space for ongoing expressions of political freedom. Whereas, Ranciere and Wolin defend self-authorized disruptive action, Arendt takes things one step further. She shows that direct action is more than a form of resistance it is an

effort to create something entirely new: a mode of collective self-governance, a constructive political vision.

Importantly, Arendt's theory of action is not reducible to a communicative theory: speech and action are not identical. For example, she uses phrases like "speech and action" and "word and deed" (Arendt 1958, 176), suggesting that action is not simply reducible to speech. At the same time, though, speech and action are clearly interrelated.

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities" (Arendt 1958, 200).

In my view, prefigurative direct action exemplifies the notion that word and deed are united: our actions are designed to give substance to our words and are an, often explicit, attempt to establish (at least temporarily) new "relations" and "realities." The prefigurative side of direct action can be understood from an Arendtian framework as the desire to enable *perpetual founding* – an understanding of democracy in which it is always possible to build and create anew in concert with others. Prefigurative direct action captures the reality that the future is always open and the prototypical democratic act is building possible futures in the present.

However, for direct action to be democratic and not collapse into authoritarianism, direct action must be, in some sense, *self-limiting*. Arendt's conceptualization of power carries precisely this self-limiting capacity. Power, on Arendt's view, cannot be collected, transferred or carried around – it can only be carried out. "[P]ower cannot be stored up and kept in reserve...like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization" (Arendt 1958, 200). Power depends on people acting together and it cannot last without some underlying ethical norm that sustains people's commitment to it. Power cannot "be possessed like strength and applied like force" because it is "dependent upon the unreliable and only temporary

agreement of many wills and intentions” (*ibid.* 201). Thus, the power mobilized by direct action can be sustained only through people’s ongoing commitment to act together. In this sense, such actions have an inherently self-limiting character. Speaking of the realm of action, Arendt (*ibid.* 199) notes, “[i]ts peculiarity is that, unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears...with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves.” The intuition then is that there is something unique about the power of action that does not outlast the act that creates it. Moreover, practitioners of direct action who are committed to democracy can and should consciously extend these self-limiting characteristics. While the practice of direct action enables people to build, create and found, democratic direct actions should leave space for others to do the same. That is to say, democratic direct action should not close off the possibility for other’s to act, to build, to create and to found. As I elaborate in the concluding section of the paper, prefigurative direct actions can amplify their democratic potential by engaging in actions that open up spaces for people to be(come) political actors. At the same time, not all direct actions with democratic potential are intended to create fully public spaces, for examples strikes or shutdowns, or efforts to establish squats, gardens or worker-managed factories. However, these types of actions can also be self-limiting insofar as the actors do not monopolize all such spaces, but leave room for others to engage with such spaces as they see fit.

## **VI. Amplifying the Democratic Potential of Direct Action**

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that direct action politics can be defended on democratic grounds and, more broadly, can be useful for the theory and practice of radical democracy. By focusing on direct action as a democratic practice, I have hoped to reaffirm the

role of power in a vibrant democratic politics. Democracy is not just about communicating or having a say.

This and similar expressions are invented to pull the teeth out of democracy: democracy means giving the people ‘a voice,’ ‘the right to dissent,’ ‘a chance to express their views,’ ‘their day in court,’ ‘an opportunity to stand up and being counted,’ – that is, anything but power (Lummis 1996, 18).

Direct action is one way in which people can mobilize power and, as such, should be considered as a core democratic practice. That said, and as I have already noted, this is not to say that all direct action is necessarily democratic. It is not. However, both the disruptive and prefigurative dimensions of direct action have democratic *potential*. In this final section of the chapter, I outline in brief some strategies for amplifying the democratic potential in direct actions – guidelines, that is, for the enactment of collective power in ways that tend to foster democracy. I mean these, on the one hand, as preliminary suggestions for activists who wish to enable the power of direct action in ways that enhance the democratic reverberations from such actions and, on the other hand, as a rough metric for theorists that wish to assess the extent to which a particular direct action is likely to have democratic or antidemocratic reverberations. I do not mean to suggest that direct actions that do not follow these strategies are never justified, but rather that their democratic potential is less robust.

*Democratic direct actions should aim to create spaces or situations in which others can be(come) political actors and exercise political freedom.* The Occupy movement is an excellent recent example of this dynamic. The direct action of occupation establishes a space that others may use for dialogue, debate, education and further action. Perhaps Occupy’s most enduring success is precisely that it provided spaces for people to experience the joys and frustrations of acting in concert. To take a different example, consider the 2006 immigrant rights protests in which “US citizens...marched alongside of the undocumented...[and] made it safer and more

possible for undocumented people to occupy the streets and make political demands themselves” (Ferguson 2012, 156). Direct actions that create and defend public spaces are probably the types of actions that have the most straight-forward democratic potential. However, we should not reduce democratic potential of direct action to this capacity alone.

*Democratic direct actions should leave physical and/or metaphorical space for others to act, rather than monopolizing spaces.* The “St. Paul Principles,” which evolved in the planning process for protests of the 2008 Republican National Convention (RNC) in the Twin Cities. The principles were necessary because there were (at least) two very different visions for how the demonstrations should manifest. On the one hand, the RNC Welcoming Committee, an anarchist organizing body, sought to facilitate a militant shut-down of the RNC, while the Coalition to March on the RNC and Stop the War wanted to pursue a permitted and family-friendly march. The St. Paul Principles, signed on to by all three of the above groups, specified (among other things) that: a) “Our solidarity will be based on respect for a diversity of tactics and the plans of other groups,” and b) “The actions and tactics used will be organized to maintain a separation of time or space” (RNC ’08 Report). More broadly, while democratic direct actions do not require the agreement of all who are likely to be affected (an impossible ideal, in any case), they should avoid dictating the actions of others and, more strongly, should leave space for others to act differently.

*Democratic direct action should tend toward tactics that are reproducible by others.* Direct actions that are less likely to have democratic potential include a range of activities. On the one side, we might consider Greenpeace-style nonviolent actions that have huge budgets (required, for example, to enable teams to rappel off of buildings to hang a massive banner) or generally require arrest. These actions are not highly reproducible given the extensive monetary

legal resources needed to make them possible – they are, in short, the province of relatively privileged professional activists. On the other side, we might consider military-style bombing campaigns like those carried out by the Weather Underground. While, in an important sense, Weather Underground’s tactical approach differs radically from Greenpeace’s approach, the two share tactical choices that unlikely to result in mass reproduction of those tactics/actions. While there may be good reasons to pursue such tactics in certain circumstances, they are likely to lack significant democratic reverberations. Importantly, the issue here is not the high level of technical expertise or specialized knowledge involved in such actions. The Anonymous hacker’s movement, for example, involves skills that only a relatively small number of people share. However, clearly those tactics have been reproducible and enabled the development of a global movement of hackers. Consider several other tactical innovations that are easily reproducible, have quickly moved across borders and have enabled others to successfully enact collective power. First, is the use of masks or bandanas to cover one’s face during a protest. During the 2010 UK Student protests against education spending cuts and tuition fee increases. During the first major demonstration on November 10, in which the Conservative Party headquarters were occupied and ransacked by protesters, very few of the participants covered their faces. The result was, predictably, that the government used CCTV cameras and media images to identify individual participants and arrest them. The subsequent demonstrations, which maintained and even increased in militancy, saw many more students covering their faces – a move that enabled widespread confrontations and disruptions with lower risk of arrest for participants. More broadly, the “black bloc” tactic – in which participants not only cover their faces but also dress in nearly identical all-black clothing, as a way of maintaining anonymity in the face of pervasive surveillance during militant public actions – emerged in Germany’s autonomist movements in



the 1980s and has since spread across Europe and North America, as well as making a more recent appearance among youth in post-revolution Egypt. A variation on these tactical innovations is the “book bloc,” in which student demonstrators prepare giant shields that are painted to look like the cover of books. These shields are then used to protect the demonstration from police violence (a tactic that conveniently upsets the violence/nonviolence dichotomy) and to convey the essential message of the protest: to stop education cuts. This tactic first appeared in Rome during student protests on November 23, 2010. By December 9, just over two weeks later, students in London used a book bloc at their aforementioned protests. In 2011, book blocs appeared in Umea, Sweden, Oakland, California and Madrid, Spain (Libcom.org 2012). Direct actions such as these that employ tactics which are easily reproducible and enable others to expand their capacity for collective power have significant democratic potential.

The final three points I would like to make are somewhat different in that they address the fact that direct actions do not just affect the power-holders and the challengers, but also fellow citizens. Democratic direct action should appreciate this fact and engage with fellows in several ways.

*Democratic direct actions should avoid disruptive actions that target or disproportionately burden “power peers” or “power lessers.”* Disruptive actions have democratic potential when they challenge or upset power relations. They are, in most circumstances, not a democratic way of engaging with people who are in a similar or lower position on society’s power hierarchy. As was suggested earlier in the chapter, disruption is a democratically appropriate tactic in the context of inequality – it can be a democratic response to conditions of domination, oppression or marginalization. It is not a democratic way of engaging with people who are not in a relative position of structural power.

*Democratic direct actions should take seriously the disruptive effects of their actions on their “power peers” and “power lessers”, strive to minimize these effects, where possible, and be able to justify these effects, where it is not possible to minimize them.* Keeping in mind that the democratic disruptions target those in positions of power, practitioners of direct action should seek to avoid disruption to fellow citizens. If direct actions are able to shut down a corporate meeting or stop the transportation of capital is the goal by focusing blockades in a relatively narrow area, this is democratically preferable to using blockades to impede a much wider area. Often, this may not be the case and consequences to fellow citizens are unavoidable. In such circumstances, democratic direct actions should engage fellow citizens with respect. While confrontation with authorities may be acceptable, participants should strive to avoid confrontation with fellows. While direct action is often a response to a failure of communication with power-holders, participants can and should still try to communicate with fellow citizens. If a blockade is shutting down a highway, participants can still try to explain and justify these disruptions to motorists. Before a large demonstration, for example, people can go door-to-door in neighborhoods that are likely to be affected and explain the likely disruptions and the reasons for those disruptions to residents. During an action, participants can work to communicate with fellows through banners or fliers that explain the purpose of the disruption. To give a personal example, I was part of a group that organized a large bike ride through the streets of Boulder to a coal plant east of town. On the way to the coal plant, the group of several hundred took up all three lanes of eastbound traffic on a major road. Because such a move undoubtedly delayed many people who were not the targets of the action, we displayed a large banner at the back of the bike ride, explaining to people how far we would be traveling on the road and recommending a specific detour to get around us. While by no means a perfect solution, this at least suggests

how disruptive direct actions can be carried out in ways that are at least cognizant of the effects such actions have on fellow citizens.

*Especially where the disruptive effects on “power peers” or “lessers” is significant, democratic direct actions should avoid actions whose disruptive effects outlast the action itself.*

Direct action actions can have irreversible outcomes, some of which are not likely to be foreseen by participants. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does require consideration. I suggest that the effects of direct actions are more democratic if they are sustained by ongoing enactments of collective power, rather than being the residual effect of a past enactment of collective power. For example, human blockades of bridges are more democratic than blowing up bridges because the bridge closure lasts only so long as people are willing and able to make it so. These kinds of direct actions cannot survive without appealing ethical commitments, sustained organization, and significant popular participation and support.

This self-limiting characteristic of direct action, often viewed as its major weakness, is in fact a strength from the democratic perspective I advance: it makes it possible for people to regularly participate in politics in robust ways (through actions that disrupt and/or prefigure), without the result of such actions collapsing into new forms of centralization, hierarchy and authoritarianism. In the next chapter, I explore the way these types of action reorient our view of democracy away from the task of legitimating power, to the task of dispersing power, and present networked organization as one practice or mechanism for fostering this dispersal.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **NETWORK DEMOCRACY: *COORDINATION WITHOUT CONSENSUS, ACTION WITHOUT AGREEMENT***

#### **I. From “The People” to “The Multitude”**

In the previous chapter, I argued for the democratic potential of direct action. Direct action is fundamentally an enactment of political power. My aim in this chapter is to show one way in which social movements have dispersed the power that direct action generates through the use of networks as a form of organization. If direct action constitutes a core democratic practice (as I argued in the previous chapter), I would like to think about networks as the organizational framework that enables these relatively autonomous and local practices to fit together in a much larger, yet still diffuse, and more powerful whole. Just as elections are the link between the practice of voting and a system of representative governance, networks are the mechanism that connects direct actions together into a “system” of self-governance. However, even though direct action is an exercise of power and even though the cumulative effect of these actions through political networks can be considered a form of self-governance, the result need not be a new form of authoritarian “rule over,” nor must this power constitute an emergent sovereign. In contrast, I argue that networks are a social movement practice that can function to both disperse power and to make self-governance possible without creating new forms of sovereignty. Putting this and the previous chapter together, direct action and networked organization are meant as the building blocks, or the basic matter, that constitutes a non-sovereign democracy.

Since my objective is to develop an account of democracy separated from sovereignty, for “the people” is a problematic lens through which to elaborate its constitutive practices. As Hardt and Negri (2004. 79) put it: “‘The people’ is a form of sovereignty contending to replace

the ruling state authority and take power...the phrase serves merely as a pretense to validate a ruling authority.” In other words, there is a deep connection between the concept of “the people” and the concept of “sovereignty.” Beyond their connection to the legitimation of state power, both “the people” and “the sovereign” depend on, or assume, a basic unity – and it is precisely this unity which the practices of direct action and networked organization are meant to resist.

[O]ne of the recurring truths of political philosophy is that only the one can rule, be it the monarch, the party, the people, or the individual; social subjects that are not unified and remain multiple cannot rule and instead must be ruled. Every sovereign power, in other words, necessarily forms a *political body* of which there is a head that commands, limbs that obey, and organs that function together to support the ruler (*ibid.* 100).

Moreover, as I discuss in more detail below, contemporary concerns about diversity and pluralism make unitary concepts such as “the people” deeply problematic insofar as they quash or gloss over the real differences that characterize the political world. In short, “the people” is a fallacious concept – such unity does not, in fact, exist. Partly as a result of these concerns, there has been a shift away from the centrality of “the people” in democratic theory and an effort to pluralize “the people.” Bohman (2007), for instance, has argued for a shift from “from *demos* to *demoi*,” a move which also opens the door to transnational forms of democracy. Hardt and Negri (2004) reject the term entirely and suggest the “the multitude” replace “the people” as the constitutive unit of a non-sovereign and global democracy. Whereas, “the people” constitute a *political body* that can authorize a sovereign ruler, “...the multitude is *living flesh* that rules itself” (*ibid.* 100).

But, how does this “living flesh” rule itself? What does “the multitude’s” self-governance look like? To begin to answer this question, in the following section, I sketch out what I take to be one of the most compelling contemporary accounts of self-organization and self-governance. After briefly defining governance, I present an overview of the key lessons

from Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning *Governing the Commons*. Her work, which notably is grounded in a fairly conservative rational choice framework, contends that something resembling anarchism – self-organization without recourse to either the state or the market – is possible, in certain contexts. Ostrom's work, therefore, is critical for thinking through the form that self-organization and self-governance might take. However, her work also has serious limitations for assessing “the multitude's” capacity for self-rule. Not only are Ostrom's case studies of successful self-governance based on relatively small communities (rather than the transnational and global communities that comprise “the multitude”), but they are often quite homogenous. Indeed, they seem to fit more closely with the old radically democratic ideal of the face-to-face assembly that characterized the Athenian *polis* or the New England town hall meeting, which I mean for direct action and networks to displace. Moreover, their relatively small size and homogeneity do not correspond to the realities of our global, complex, and pluralistic societies.

And, as I show in section III, it is precisely the facts of difference and diversity that are the starting point for a range of contemporary democratic theories. Difference and diversity are the jumping off point for theorists of democracy because they are generally seen as both a fact and a problem for democracy – as something, therefore, that needs to be addressed or overcome. I review two primary sets of responses to these concerns. The first response, articulated in varying ways by the democratic theories of Rawls and Habermas, seeks to overcome difference in order to enable the *demos* to form a body capable of ruling. As Ferguson (2012, 12-29) has argued, democratic theorists generally – and, on her account, wrongly – assume that some kind of commonality is crucial for democracy to function. Thus, it is not surprising that one school of thought would be to find ways to constrain, or otherwise make safe, the pluralism that

characterizes contemporary politics and polities. However, I argue that these efforts to minimize difference in the name of consensus are wrong-headed. Rawls disguises liberalism as “reasonableness” and then proceeds to use that criterion to exclude people and ideas from public, political life. Habermas, while leaving the political terrain more open to diverse actors and ideas, prioritizes the need to reach agreement at the end of a diffuse, discursive process. Thus, both democratic theories are, ultimately, oriented toward commonality and unity against difference and diversity. The second response, articulated by Mouffe, is to foreground difference and reject the ideals of unity and agreement. She argues instead for an “agonistic model of democracy” (Mouffe 2000, 80-105) characterized by ongoing conflict and contestation over basic political matters, including matters of inclusion and exclusion. The facts of difference and diversity, for Mouffe (*ibid.* xii), speak to “the conflictual nature of politics and the ineradicability of antagonism.” While, I am in basic agreement with Mouffe on this point, I think her analysis leaves her open to the charge that she provides little in the way of a positive prescription for governing – or at least acting together – in the context of ineradicable antagonism.

If one accepts the basic tenets of Mouffe’s argument – that is, if one sees difference and diversity not as problems to be overcome, but as the core of democracy itself – is there still a way to theorize governance in such a context? To ask this differently, in the absence of a cohesive political body called “the people” is self-governance still possible? Hardt and Negri (2004, xiv) summarize the quandary nicely:

*The people* has traditionally been a unitary conception...the people reduces...diversity to a unity and makes of the population a single identity: ‘the people’ is one. The multitude, in contrast, is many. The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity...Thus *the challenge posed by the concept of multitude is for social multiplicity to manage to communicate and act in common while remaining internally different* (xiv; second emphasis added).

My aim in the second half of the chapter is to provide one response to this challenge, and to see what may come from an engagement between a theory of self-governance and a theory of agonal democracy. The primary mechanism for fostering the goals of both – enabling self-governance in the context of difference – is networks as a form of political organization. In section IV, I offer an account of decentralized coordination and networked organization. While it would be a mistake to characterize networks as perfectly egalitarian – and indeed, there are different kinds of networks, some much more hierarchical than others – “distributed networks” provide a form of organization that enables coordination and common action in the context of dispersed power and difference. I theorize networks as valuable precisely because they enable *cooperation without consensus* and *action without agreement*. More broadly, this points toward a *democracy without (unified) decision*.

In section V, I consider the applicability of networked self-governance on two very different geographic scales. First, I discuss the potential to mobilize networks on a transnational or global level in order to “scale-up” democracy. Here, I consider the possibilities for networks to function as coordinating mechanisms for democratic action across borders. In certain respects, this is the most challenging level to think about because of the manifold problems associated with global democracy. However, it is also the level at which much theorizing about networks as occurred. Indeed, what is often taken to be most inspiring about networked forms of organization is their potential to foster transnational or global democracy. However, the democratic desirability and utility of networks extends beyond its transnational potential. As I will argue, networked forms of organization can also be usefully conceptualized and applied at lower levels of governance, as well. So, in this sense, I “scale-down” networks and think about their utility on a much smaller scale, such as when people share a similar geographic space.



Whereas others have theorized the democratic potential of networks on a transnational scale, I theorize their potential as an alternative to the general assembly. In this sense, I argue against “direct democracy” and for “network democracy.” Whereas Occupy and other social movements emphasize consensus forms of decision-making when sharing a common space, I argue that networks – precisely because they enable people to decide differently – can be meaningfully applied locally, as well. Finally, in section VI, I conclude by connecting the various themes of the chapter – self-governance, the challenges of pluralism, and the possibilities of decentralized, networked organization together. I explain how, and to what extent, networks can foster self-governance in the context of difference and discuss the implications of this for the way we conceptualize democracy.

## **II. *Governance without Government: Potentials and Challenges***

Governance refers to the “constellation of authoritative rules, institutions, and practices by means of which any collectivity manages its affairs” (Ruggie 2004, 504). This definition is intentionally broad and can refer to a number of different ways a collectivity might regulate the behavior of its members and coordinate their activities: from a harsh legal code, to the “invisible hand” of the market, to the rule by the *demos*, to a set of norms. Thus, under this definition, governance is an absolutely unavoidable issue in any human community, whether that community is governed by an authoritarian dictator, representative democracy, laissez-faire capitalism, or informal methods of social approval and condemnation. My concern in this chapter regards, specifically, the potential for self-governance. By this, I mean the notion of a collectivity managing their affairs without an actor external to the collectivity itself – i.e. without a state or an otherwise external coercive body utilizing violence or coercion as a means for ensuring compliance. In this sense, self-governance refers to “the capacity to get things done

without the legal competence to command that they be done” (Lipschutz 1999, 102, citing Ernst-Otto Czempiel), or governance without government.

In developing an account of self-governance, I begin with Ostrom’s work on the governance of “the commons,” or common-pool resources (CPRs).<sup>31</sup> Though, I am interested in self-governance beyond CPRs, her work is a good jumping off point because she has demonstrated convincingly that self-governance can work well in certain contexts. She argues:

Neither the state nor the market is uniformly successful in enabling individuals to sustain long-term, productive use of natural resource systems. Further, communities of individuals have relied on institutions resembling neither the state nor the market to govern some resource systems with reasonable degrees of success over long periods of time (Ostrom 1990, 1).

Because neither of the two dominant forms of centralized power in the world today – rule by the state and rule by capital – always work well, and because they raise a variety of normative problems, Ostrom develops a theory of “self-organizing and self-governing forms of collective action” (*ibid* 25). Focusing on the context of CPRs, she argues that there are three central problems any system of self-governance must address are: 1) supplying new institutions (or basic rules), 2) establishing credible commitments, and 3) mutual monitoring (*ibid.* 42-45).

The first problem requires that – in the absence of a state bureaucracy or private actor – a group of people must overcome the collective action problem (Olson 1965) and work together to develop some common norms and/or institutions. Her case studies of successful self-governance of CPRs – including a fishery in Turkey, communal meadows and forests in Switzerland and Japan, and irrigation systems in Spain and the Philippines – provide empirical grounds for identifying the enabling conditions for overcoming collective action problems. Communities are most likely to overcome the collective action problem in a situation in which: 1) individuals have

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<sup>31</sup> “The term ‘common-pool resource’ refers to a natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use” (Ostrom 1990, 30).

low discount rates (they plan to stay in the area and use the resource indefinitely); 2) there is relative equality among the users, such that they are likely to be impacted in similar ways; 3) individuals are significantly invested in or dependent upon the resource for their livelihood or overall economic well-being; and 4) there are local leaders that cannot simply develop private solutions, but must instead organize for common solutions. As I suggest shortly, all of these conditions become much more problematic for issues of global self-governance.

Regarding the second two problems of credible commitment and mutual monitoring, Ostrom finds that successful examples of self-governance develop institutions or rules that link commitment and monitoring – mutual monitoring, in other words, provides both private benefits for the monitor and collective benefits for others (*ibid*, 59). More specifically, institutions can be structured so that each individual has an incentive to monitor the others and report infractions. The advantage of mutual monitoring over state-based monitoring is that users can have a direct incentive to prevent others from “over-harvesting” whereas state agents may lack the incentive to do so (and may actually have an incentive to accept bribes). The case of fisheries in Alanya, Turkey and communal forests in Japan provide good illustrations of successful mutual monitoring. In the Alanya fishery, there are better and worse fishing locations and competition for the best spots had increased production costs for individuals (because of uncertainty regarding their harvesting potential on any given day) and resulted in conflict between fishers. To remedy this problem, a list of all the eligible, licensed fishers is prepared each September. Each fisher is then assigned a particular fishing spot at which to begin fishing. From that day forward, each fisher moves to the adjacent fishing location, ensuring that everyone has the advantage to sometimes fish at the best spots, while reducing the costly competition and conflict of each person trying to get the best spot every day. Ingeniously, the “process of monitoring and

enforcing the system is...accomplished by the fishers themselves as a by-product of the incentive created by the rotation system...Cheating on the system will be observed by the very fishers who have rights to be in the best spots and will be willing to defend their rights..." while the other fishers "will want to ensure that their own rights will not be usurped on the days when they are assigned good spots" (*ibid* 19-20). Similarly, in Japan's communal meadows, local peasants rely on the common lands for valuable forest products, such as timber and thatch for roofing and weaving. Each household, therefore, would have an incentive to go into the commons and take as many resources from it as they could use – behavior that, if it were generalized, would over-exploit the common resource. As such, another clever method of mutual monitoring is enforced. People are only allowed to enter specific forest zones on appointed days. During that day, people can harvest as much as they want, but the haul is all grouped together and divided evenly into clusters. Each household is then assigned one cluster on the basis of a lottery (*ibid*. 67). This system incentivizes cooperative work, while creating institutions that make stealing difficult if not impossible.

Ostrom's work is ground-breaking because it shows that – and how – successful self-organization and self-governance are possible. However, Ostrom's framework, alone, is insufficient for the task at hand, which involves the possibilities of self-organization and self-governance on a much larger scale and in much more pluralistic contexts. Indeed, she carefully limits the cases she seeks to explain. For one, Ostrom examines relatively small-scale CPRs where the number of users ranges from 50 to 15,000 persons, such as fisheries, grazing areas, groundwater basins, irrigation systems and communal forests. Moreover, she identifies four conditions that specify when groups are likely to overcome the collective action problem and develop institutions of self governance (I have mentioned these previously but restate them here

for emphasis): Individuals have *low discount rates*. They plan to stay in the area and use the resource indefinitely, expecting their children and grandchildren to do the same. There is *relative equality* among the users, such that they are likely to be impacted in similar ways. Individuals have a *significant investment* in the resource; it constitutes their livelihood. In other words, individuals are “heavily dependent on the CPR for economic returns” (*ibid.* 26). *Private solutions are not possible*. Local leaders cannot simply develop private accommodations, but must instead organize for common solutions

In cases of the global commons, *not one of these conditions holds* – at least not in a strong sense. First, many people today are highly mobile and are capable of moving from one location to another in search of income or a livable environment. Second, there is anything but relative equality at the global level. Instead we see almost unimaginable levels of inequality between the best off and the worst off. Third, though we all depend on global CPRs such as the ocean and the atmosphere, most people do not have a significant economic (i.e. short-term and self-interested) stake in the overall health of those resources. Fourth, private solutions to commons problems are possible for some people – especially those with the most resources. For example, as public water becomes more contaminated, the well-off can purchase water filtration systems or water from clean sources elsewhere in order to avoid the effects of pollution.

In addition to these concerns, there is another way in which Ostrom’s analysis essentially brackets the problems of global commons. In her cases, the actors in a given CPR have *no* “significant impact on the environment of others living outside the range of their CPR” (*ibid.* 31). In other words, Ostrom effectively excludes problems of externalities, wherein the activities of some have important consequences for others not included in the “transaction.” Because

many contemporary problems are of just this type – there are, in other words, boundary-crossing effects – a broader theory of self-governance will need to be much more cosmopolitan and fluid.

The task, then, for a theory of self-governance relevant to our contemporary conditions is to consider its possibilities and challenges when the conditions that Ostrom identifies largely do not apply. “The multitude,” in particular, is a social form that does *not* share the basic components of Ostrom’s examples. First, “the multitude” is global, rather than local. Second, “the multitude” is diffuse, rather than clearly bounded. Third, “the multitude” is diverse and differentiated, rather than relatively homogeneous. And, yet, despite these apparent challenges, Hardt and Negri (2004, 100) argue that “the multitude” is a “*living flesh* that rules itself.” How, then, is this possible? What forms will such self-governance take, if indeed it is possible at all? A preliminary answer to that question will need to engage with the three critical differences between Ostrom’s self-governing communities and Hardt and Negri’s self-governing multitude – addressing, in particular, “the multitude’s” global, diffuse and unbounded nature, on the one hand, and its qualities of being diverse and differentiated, on the other. I take up these two challenges in reverse order. In the next section, I take up a slice of the literature in democratic theory on difference, diversity and pluralism. The goal is to highlight the potential problems that difference and diversity raise for democracy, as well as explain their intractability and, hence, the need for democracy to find ways of working with, rather than working against, such facts. I position networks as a mode of self-governance that accommodates and, in fact, enables difference rather than seeking to suppress it. Then, in the remainder of the chapter, I contend that not only are networked modes of organization attuned to the fact of pluralism, but they also enable a form of self-governance that is compatible with the diffuse and unbounded nature of “the multitude”

### III. Difference, Diversity and Pluralism in Democratic Theory

It has become commonplace to locate the starting point for one's democratic theory in the fact of difference, diversity, and pluralism. Various thinkers articulate this in different, but similar ways. Arendt (1958, 7) identifies this as "the human condition of plurality, the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world...[T]his plurality is specifically *the* condition...of all political life." For Habermas, our "lifeworld" has become "pluralized and ever more differentiated" (Habermas 1996, 26). Or, as Rehg puts it in his introduction to Habermas' *Between Facts and Norms* (1996, xvii):

Modern societies witness an increasing variety of groups and subcultures, each having its own distinct traditions, values, and worldview. As a result, more and more conflicts must be settled by reaching explicit agreement on a greater range of contestable matters, under conditions in which the shared basis for reaching such agreement is diminishing.

For Rawls (1993, 3-4), the "political culture of a democratic society is always marked by a diversity of opposing and irreconcilable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines." Moreover, this "diversity of reasonable comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines found in modern democratic societies is not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy" (*ibid.* 36). How, then, Rawls (and others) wonders, is a stable, just and democratic society possible, given these unavoidable and irresolvable differences? For Cohen (1996, 96): "My question...is prompted by the aim of formulating a conception of democracy suited to the kind of human difference captured in the 'fact of reasonable pluralism' – the fact that there are distinct, incompatible understandings of value..."

In short, democratic theory is preoccupied with issues of diversity, difference, and pluralism. On the one hand, they seem clearly to be the facts of modern societies, and, on the

other hand, they are potentially problematic for democracy (and, hence, for a theory of self-governance). Indeed, democracy is often understood as requiring some basic forms of commonality between “the people” in order to enable them to act as a cohesive political body, a unit of collective decision-making. Ferguson identifies three democratic requirements that lead theorists to focus on commonality and see difference as a problem.

Democracy, in its most basic definition, is the rule of the demos, or the people. Yet every demos is composed of a multiplicity of individuals. The first requirement of democracy is to constitute from this multiplicity a cohesive group. This is the requirement for a *collective identity* that unites disparate persons into a people... Democracy’s second requirement is... for some kind of *horizontal affect*, a bond between the individuals who make up the demos that sustains their commitment to sharing in rule with one another... Finally, for the people to govern itself, the many individuals that make it up, each with their own individual wills, must be able together to constitute a single, *collective agency* (Ferguson 2012, 23-24).

Whether we focus on identity, affect, or agency, democracy seems to require some form of commonality.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the facts of difference, diversity, and pluralism, which seem to suggest a lack of or a threat to commonality, have rightly become the starting point for a variety of democratic theories. These facts, however, can be responded to in different ways. I see two broad trends or arguments that develop from these theories. One approach is oriented toward bracketing differences in an effort to find consensus among diversity, while the other approach emphasizes the unavoidability – and democratic necessity – of conflict. The first approach can be characterized by two strategies, one adopted by Rawls and the other by Habermas. The Rawlsian approach works to bracket the most problematic differences by relegating them to outside the political sphere. The goal is to suppress differences first, so that coming to democratic agreements is easier. The Habermasian approach, in contrast, does not bracket most differences at the outset,

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<sup>32</sup> In this chapter, I mainly interested in disrupting the third “democratic requirement”: the need for a single collective agent in order to enable collective agency.



but still is oriented toward the production of consensus and agreement. If the first suppresses difference at the beginning of the democratic process, the second suppress differences at the end of that process. I outline and critique these two strategies below, and then move on to the second major approach as articulated by Mouffe.

### *Rawls and the “Reasonable” Suppression of Differences*

While Rawls recognizes and begins from the fact of pluralism, his main objective, on my reading, is to suppress those differences by bracketing them outside the political sphere. For Rawls, the word “reasonable” does a great deal of work. “Persons are reasonable...when, among equals say, they are ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so” (Rawls 1993, 49). Given that, “reasonable persons affirm only reasonable comprehensive doctrines,” with these being defined a reasonable comprehensive doctrine defined as one that: a) “covers the major religious, philosophical, and moral aspects of human life in a more or less consistent and coherent manner;” b) effectively singles “out which values to count as especially significant and how to balance them when they conflict;” and c) “belongs to, or draws upon, a tradition of thought and doctrine” (Rawls 1993, 59). This definition, as Rawls notes, is meant to be quite broad because we ought to consider many competing comprehensive doctrines as reasonable, even if we do not endorse them or live by them ourselves. A comprehensive doctrine constitutes a view of the good, and it is a reasonable view of the good when it meets the above criteria. Rawls (1993, 60) then asserts that “reasonable persons will think it unreasonable to use political power...to repress comprehensive views that are not unreasonable, though different from their own.” Or, as he puts it later, the reasonable person will “recognize that to insist on their own comprehensive view must be seen by the rest as their simply insisting on their own beliefs” (*ibid.*

127-28). In other words, it is unreasonable to seek to enact one's own conception of the good insofar as others have divergent conceptions of the good.

Here, Rawls essentially defines "reasonable" as "liberal." Sandel (1996, 10) contends that "Kantian liberals," like Rawls, "draw a distinction between the 'right' and the 'good' – between a framework of basic rights and liberties, and the conceptions of the good that people may choose to pursue within that framework." If a liberal is one who (among other things) prioritizes the right over the good – that is, they promote a society in which each individual has the right to pursue their own conception of the good, so long as their doing so does not infringe on others' right to do the same – then this seems to be an effort to sneak in liberal principles behind the guise of reasonability. Rawls defines reasonability as the willingness to bracket one's view of the good in politics and view it as a purely private matter. As Mouffe (2000, 24-25) puts it:

What is this if not an indirect form of asserting that reasonable persons are those who accept the fundamentals of liberalism? In other words, the distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' helps to draw a frontier between the doctrines that accept the liberal principles and the ones that oppose them. It means that its function is *political* and that it aims at discriminating between a permissible pluralism of religious, moral or philosophical conceptions, as long as those views can be relegated to the sphere of the private and satisfy the liberal principles – and what would be an unacceptable pluralism because it would jeopardize the dominance of liberal principles in the public sphere.

Indeed, one of the key distinctions between non-liberal and liberal comprehensive doctrines seems to be on this exact point: should society specify and promote a particular conception of the good, or should it avoid specifying a conception of the good and allow each individual to decide this question for herself? Mouffe's point here is not that this is necessarily the wrong view, and my aim is not to argue against the priority of the right over the good. Rather, the relevant point here is simply that not everyone agrees with the priority of the right over the good or thinks that

our moral commitments ought to be left to the private sphere (including, for example, Aristotelians, communitarians, and radical democrats). Coles (2005, 3), for example, highlights the conflict that exists between the project of radical democracy and the Rawlsian doctrine of political liberalism. Rawls' approach disqualifies "a priori diverse advocates of more-radical democracy as proponents of 'comprehensive doctrines'" while disguising its own political and historically-specific nature. In other words, political liberalism sees "all but the most instrumental movements toward radical democracy to be simply illegitimate attempts to empower 'a highly contentious view of the human good'" (Coles 2005, 39). Thus, in casting reasonableness as a liberal prioritizing of the right over the good – and characterizing all who believe that their vision of the good life ought to be the one that is shared by society as a whole as "unreasonable" – "allows Rawls to present as a moral exigency what is really a political decision" (Mouffe 2000, 24). Rawls imposes the liberal comprehensive doctrine, while acting as though he is treating all comprehensive doctrines equally.<sup>33</sup> As such, in the guise of developing a pluralist account of democracy, I see Rawls as suppressing difference and undercutting diversity.

### *Habermas and the Ideal of Agreement*

In contrast, Habermas's theory begins from much more open and pluralistic terrain. In particular, Habermas does not construct a sharp separation between public reasoning and private comprehensive doctrines thus leaving more open to political debate and contestation. For instance, Benhabib (1996, 76) contends that, in contrast to Rawls, the Habermasian...

...deliberative model does not restrict the agenda of public conversation; in fact it encourages discourse about the lines separating the public from the private; [and] second the deliberative model locates the public sphere in civil society, and is

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<sup>33</sup> Indeed, being neutral toward conceptions of the good – or, at least, contending that it is desirable to leave conceptions of the good to the private realm and bracket them in the public realm – is itself a conception of the good.

much more interested in the ways in which political processes and the 'background culture' interact.

This is fair enough. However, if Habermas does not suppress difference at the outset, the suppression of difference occurs as an outcome of his account of the deliberative process. In short, the end goal or result of deliberation should be some form of unity. Take, for instance, Habermas's core concept of "communicative action":

[T]he concept of *communicative action* refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations... The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement... [I]nterpretation refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus (Habermas 1984, 86).

In this short passage, he articulates the goals of communicative action as "understanding," "agreement," and "consensus." Moreover, and in much more recent work, he specifies his "discourse principle" as follows: "Just those action norms [e.g. rules or institutional arrangements] are valid to which all possibly affected person could agree as participants in rational discourses" (Habermas 1996, 107). In other words, a law is legitimate, on this view, if everyone would agree to it, if it was legislated under ideal conditions and with the right procedures in place.<sup>34</sup> Habermas, of course, recognizes that this is not likely to be achieved in reality – that "it is unclear how this procedural concept, so freighted with idealizations, can link up with empirical investigations that conceive politics primarily as an arena of power processes" (1996, 287). The discourse principle is, rather, conceived as a regulative ideal, a measure by which to evaluate existing institutions.

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<sup>34</sup> Benhabib (1996, 70) identifies this ideal features as: "1) participation in such deliberation is governed by norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and to open debate; 2) all have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation; and 3) all have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out."

Issues about plausibility aside, what is at question here is the theoretical goal itself: agreement and consensus. And, on this point, I think there can be little debate. To give but two more examples: “Communicatively acting subjects commit themselves to coordinating their action plans on the basis of a consensus...” (Habermas 1996, 119) Or, “the legal community constitutes itself...on the basis of a discursively achieved agreement (*ibid.* 449). So, while Habermas starts from the premise of difference, diversity, and pluralism – in a way that is laudably more open than the Rawlsian approach – he ends up trying to overcome these facts. As Gould (1996, 172) perfectly puts it:

[T]he telos of the discourse, what characterizes its aim and method, is agreement. Difference is something to be gotten past. And the reciprocal recognition is for the sake of common agreement rather than also for the sake of enhancing and articulating diversity. Diversity may be the original condition of the polyvocal discourse but univocity is its normative principle.

We can now shift to our second major approach to the facts of difference, diversity and pluralism, characterized here by Mouffe’s (2000) “agonistic model of democracy.” Though they accomplish this in somewhat different ways, “in both Rawls and Habermas...the very condition for the creation of consensus is the elimination of pluralism from the public sphere” (Mouffe 2000, 49). It is exactly this elimination of pluralism that Mouffe challenges.

### *Mouffe and Agonal Democracy*

Whereas Rawls and Habermas see in difference a threat to democracy, Mouffe sees their proposed solution to difference – consensus or unanimity – as the real problem. “To negate the ineradicable character of antagonism and to aim at a universal rational consensus – this is the real threat to democracy” (Mouffe 2000, 22).<sup>35</sup> The condition of pluralism is the very condition of democracy, so efforts to suppress that difference are, at their core, anti-democratic. For Mouffe

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<sup>35</sup> This is not the only central difference between these thinkers, of course. For instance, whereas, Habermas sees liberalism and democracy as mutually constitutive, Mouffe sees them as fundamentally in tension.

(2000, 15-16) we must accept that “conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitely achieved as the full actualization of the unity of ‘the people.’” The challenge for democratic politics then is *not* to find the right procedure – whether that be “public reason” or “communicative action” – for achieving consensus. Instead, democratic politics should be aimed at enabling and fostering contestation over competing values and competing interpretations of those values. Though Mouffe argues that “antagonism” is basically “ineradicable,” she contends that the aim of democratic politics is to transform it. While antagonism occurs between enemies, agonism occurs between adversaries – though we disagree with adversaries we recognize their right to defend their views. The aim of Mouffe’s vision, therefore, is to enable conflict, but transform conflict from antagonism to agonism (*ibid.* 102-103).

While agonal democrats like Mouffe do *valorize* conflict as a necessary element of democratic politics, I think, they are wrongly viewed as *glorifying* conflict. It is not that conflict is the highest aim of democratic politics, but rather that in the context of pluralism it is unavoidable and, hence democratically necessary. “In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism” (Mouffe 2000, 34). Attempts to permanently resolve such disagreements through the achievement of consensus do not constitute the pinnacle of democracy, but its annulment. They are a flight from democratic politics, as such.

What is misguided is the search for a final rational resolution...Such a search should be recognized for what it really is, another attempt at insulating politics from the effects of the pluralism of value...Democratic theory should renounce those forms of escapism and face the challenge that the recognition of the pluralism of values entails” (Mouffe 93).

More fundamentally, and in a way, I take this as Mouffe's central point, attempts to reach consensus in a pluralistic world are, fundamentally, exercises of power. Perhaps as a result of their emphasis on process and procedure, what deliberative democrats miss, or at least under-theorize, is "the moment of 'decision'" (Mouffe 2000, 130). Deliberative democrats "are unable to recognize that bringing a deliberation to a close always results from a *decision* which excludes other possibilities" (Mouffe 2000, 105). For Mouffe, we should acknowledge the "moment of decision" for what it is: an expression of power.

Consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of hegemony and the crystallization of power relations... To deny the existence of such a moment of closure, or to present [it] as dictated by rationality or morality, is to naturalize what should be perceived as a contingent and temporary" hegemony (Mouffe 2000, 49).<sup>36</sup>

It is not that Mouffe thinks we should avoid, resist or put off the "moment of decision," for this is an essential part of politics. Thus, it is a mistake to view Mouffe's agonal democracy as simply an argument for perpetual contestation. Rather, she pays more attention to the "moment of decision" – the culminating act of governance – than deliberative democrats do. What she argues is that these moments, the very products of governance, always "entail an element of force and violence that can never be eliminated" (*ibid.* 130). At some point a decision has to be reached, and since consensus is an empirical (for Habermasians) or conceptual (for Mouffe) impossibility, a decision will be taken without consensus. Thus, there is no possibility of

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<sup>36</sup> Mouffe's view that any consensus or decision is a mere "expression of hegemony and the crystallization of power relations" leaves her open to the criticism that she offers no standard for evaluating whether certain instances of consensus – or certain power relations – are better than others. Benhabib (1996, 78), for example, says: "I think it is fair to ask whether the radical democratic theories [including that elaborated by Mouffe]... allow for a coherent theory of rights such as would protect both basic rights and liberties for all, and defend minority rights against the tyranny of the majority." Because Mouffe emphasizes the contingency of existing political arrangements – and that such arrangements are little more than manifestations of power relations – Benhabib contends that it cannot defend a system of rights, which liberal and deliberative democrats see as enabling the very contestation Mouffe valorizes. Agonal democracy is a highly unstable form and perhaps contains within it the seeds of its own destruction insofar as it does not offer a standard for excluding forms of pluralism that are anti-pluralistic, or forms of contention that seeks to eradicate future contention.

achieving a non-coercive consensus. Agreement, from this angle, is an act of violence. Though expressed in a somewhat different way, Maeckelbergh (2009, 32) argues that it is precisely this concern that motivates the alter-globalization movement to resist state-centric forms of democracy:

[A]s long as democracy is defined as a system of majority rule it necessarily requires an apparatus of coercive force... This relationship between democracy and violence is part of what leads many movement actors to question the desirability of democracy and to insist... [on] a radically different form.

The rejection of the ideal consensus or agreement – regardless of the procedures for attaining it – does not spell the end of democracy, though, for either Mouffe or alter-globalization movement activists. Rather it points us toward a democracy not oriented toward consensus. For Mouffe, this means an orientation toward contestation– an impetus to question the existing consensus and problematize them as moments of closure. Surely, alter-globalization movements and many other social movements, as well, agree on this point. However, I think movement practices suggest that they want to do more than that. Not only do they contest existing decisions, but they also strive to develop models of decision-making that minimize, if not avoid entirely, the coercion and violence that the politics of consensus entails.<sup>37</sup> In other words, I would like to argue that social movements – through the practice of networked organization – reformulate what the “moment of decision” itself looks like. What if the “moment of decision” could incorporate different decisions, specifically, decisions to act differently? Rather than thinking about decision as necessarily involving agreement, consensus and unanimity, networks enable people to act together, while acting differently.

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<sup>37</sup> Though, as we shall see, some contemporary social movements have remained wedded to consensus through the model of the “general assembly.” I will argue later in the chapter that this is the wrong move and that movement actors should find ways of implementing a networked form of organization, even when sharing a common space.



If Rawls and Habermas suppress difference in order to govern, and Mouffe enables differences but does not offer a more liberatory model of governing, my aim is to find something of a middle ground between these two approaches – or, perhaps, a radical alternative to them. On the one hand, I want to take difference and pluralism as a given and see the conflict that such facts generate as an unavoidable component of democracy; in short, I agree with Mouffe, that consensus is an impossibility in a democratic context. On the other hand, I do not want to abandon the task of governance or fail to distinguish between better and worse “moments of decision,” since they are all necessarily mere functions of power. Rather, I argue that social movement actors develop and employ practices that help individuals and groups work together despite their differences – to simultaneously cooperate and act while “resisting unity through networks” (Maeckelberg 2009, 188). In this way, I hope to show that networks avoid the problems associated with both Rawls and Habermas, i.e. the way both seek to suppress difference. They neither exclude persons from participation at the outset – indeed, the boundaries of the networked are blurry and fluid, perhaps even to a fault – nor do they require a consensus or even agreement as an end product. At the same time, networks offer a more liberatory way of thinking about “the moment of decision” and challenge of self-governance insofar as they make it possible for people to act together, while retaining their differences. We can, therefore, avoid the conclusion that consensus is necessary in order to coordinate, or that agreement is necessary in order to act together. Networks offer a model of self-governance appropriate for contexts characterized by difference, diversity, and pluralism.

#### **IV. Non-Hierarchical Coordination and Networked Organization**

How can governance occur without unity – without either a unitary decision-making body (e.g. the king, parliament, or the people) or unanimity of outcome (e.g. the decision, the

agreement, the consensus). Or, to ask this question in a more positive light, how can groups of people create norms, accomplish tasks, and act together in coordinated ways, when no one possesses the legal competence to issue enforceable commands that others (some of whom inevitably disagree) must follow?

*“Coordination without Hierarchy”*

I begin to answer these questions by employing Chisholm’s (1989) *Coordination without Hierarchy*, which articulates a theory of decentralized and informal coordination. The theory is developed on the basis of his study of the San Francisco Bay Area public transit system, which involves coordination between many different local and regional agencies, none of whom possesses final decision-making authority. Though coordination and organization are frequently linked with hierarchy and unification, Chisholm rejects this identification.

To coordinate means to place or arrange things in proper position relative to each other and to the system of which they form parts – to bring into proper combined order as parts of a whole. It means, in essence, to bring about some kind of order, not to provide a hierarchical unified structure...I strongly dispute the reflexive assumption that coordination is inexorably tied to centralized arrangements such as comprehensive plans and consolidated agencies. (Chisholm 1989, 13).

While centralized, hierarchical and unified organization is *one* approach to resolving problems of coordination they are not the same thing as coordination. On the one hand, centralized organizations are sometimes inadequate to resolve coordination problems. “Where formal organizational arrangements are absent, insufficient, or inappropriate for providing the requisite coordination, informal adaptations develop to satisfy the need” (*ibid.* 17). On the other hand, sometimes coordination is possible in the absence of centralized organization, as both Ostrom and Chisholm demonstrate. Essentially, he theoretically separates coordination from centralization and elaborates the necessary conditions for coordination, whether the tasks of

coordination are carried out by centralized, hierarchical bodies or decentralized and non-hierarchical actors.

Any process of coordination involves four elements: 1) a plan of action must be developed; 2) the plan of action must be communicated to the parties who will carry it out; 3) the plan as developed and communicated must be accepted by those parties; and 4) relevant information must be acquired and disseminated (Chisholm 1989, 29). One way of accomplishing these four components is through centralized authority issuing of directives, communicating relevant information, and enforcing compliance. Indeed, this is the typical, hierarchical model of organization and decision-making, in which there is a definite top or center, from which enforceable decisions flow. Those at the bottom of the pyramid or on the periphery may be able to communicate with and even influence the central decision-maker (as, for example, democratic elections aim to do), but these actors do not have the ability to make decisions on their own. Further, most actors within this organization do not have easy ways of communicating with each other and must go through prescribed channels and chains of command.

However, hierarchical chain-of-command is not the only way of coordinating action. It is theoretically possible that a plan of action can be developed, communicated and accepted through decentralized, networked communication of dispersed actors. In contrast to the way the hierarchical model centralizes authority and decision-making power into a single unit, decentralized “organization permits the continued existence of formally autonomous organizations in the face of mutual interdependence” enabling multiple centers of power, innovation, and experimentation. As such, “it can achieve other values, such as reliability, flexibility, and representativeness, that would otherwise be precluded or substantially diminished

under formal consolidation” (*ibid.* 17-18). A second key distinction between hierarchical and non-hierarchical coordination is that, in the latter context, individuals at any level of one organization can communicate with individuals at any level of another organization, rather than following a circuitous chain-of-command mode of communication (*ibid.* 33-34).

This ability to communicate horizontally, rather than just vertically, has major informational advantages. In particular, it enhances the *quality* of the information generated, the *speed* at which it is generated, and the *flexibility* with which actors can respond to new or changing information. That the quality of information is improved through inclusive and decentralized processes is broadly recognized, from many different perspectives. For example, Benhabib (1996, 71, citing Bernard Manin) partly defends deliberative democracy on the basis that it improves the quality of information because:

1) no single individual can anticipate and foresee all the variety of perspectives through which matters of ethics and politics would be perceived by different individuals; and 2) no single individual can possess all the information deemed relevant to a certain decision affecting all.

From a very different theoretical perspective, Hayek (2007, 95) argues that...

...decentralization has become necessary because nobody can consciously balance all the considerations bearing on the decisions of so many individuals, the coordination can clearly be effected not by ‘conscious control’ but only by arrangements which convey to each agent the information he must possess in order effectively to adjust his decisions to those of others.

The core benefit of decentralization, on this account, is that it collects and conveys information more effectively than any single entity ever could, even if that entity was specifically aiming at collecting and conveying information.

In addition to collecting high quality information, the decentralized communication that characterizes non-hierarchical coordination enhances the speed at which information is generated, as well as the flexibility with which actors can respond to that information. Indeed,

informational advantages associated with speed and flexibility, enabled by decentralized modes of communication, have become even stronger with technology such as Twitter. This technology allows instant communication between individuals (linked by some common interest or issue) that do not even know each other in order to provide updates and new information in an incredibly timely manner. Consider, for example the June 2009 demonstrations in Iran that were effectively coordinated using Twitter. While the Iranian government exercises significant control over the mass media, tens of thousands of Iranians were able to coordinate a sustained uprising against the regime. A *Time* magazine article (Grossman 2009) nicely summarizes what made Twitter such an effective mode of coordination:

It's free, highly mobile, very personal and very quick. It's also built to spread, and fast. Twitterers like to append notes called hashtags — #theylooklikethis — to their tweets, so that they can be grouped and searched for by topic; especially interesting or urgent tweets tend to get picked up and retransmitted by other Twitterers, a practice known as retweeting, or just RT. And Twitter is promiscuous by nature: tweets go out over two networks, the Internet and SMS, the network that cell phones use for text messages, and they can be received and read on practically anything with a screen and a network connection.

This makes Twitter practically ideal for a mass protest movement, both very easy for the average citizen to use and very hard for any central authority to control. The same might be true of e-mail and Facebook, but those media aren't public. They don't broadcast, as Twitter does. While the front pages of Iranian newspapers were full of blank space where censors had whited-out news stories, Twitter was delivering information from street level, in real time:

*Woman says ppl knocking on her door 2 AM saying they were intelligence agents, took her daughter*

*Ashora platoons now moving from valiasr toward National Tv staion. mousavi's supporters are already there. my father is out there!*

Iranian activists could communicate information about police movements throughout Tehran immediately, enabling others to quickly respond and change plans – knowing where exactly to be in order to avoid, or engage, the police. As the use of Twitter in Iran demonstrates, the

decentralized nature of this type of communication is precisely what makes them such useful tools for coordination.

Drawing on Chisholm (1989, 186-87) and the above example, the main advantages of decentralized coordinative mechanisms are: 1) they increase the accuracy of information insofar as information can be produced and processed by a wider range of actors, each with their own social position; 2) they tend to be much quicker; 3) they are better able to respond to change and unanticipated problems, whereas formal mechanisms tend to take time to alter after unpredicted issues arise; and 4) informal systems of coordination tend to promote the values of “differentiation, representation and reliability...more effectively than a formal centralized system.”

### *Networked Organization*

With this backdrop in mind – that is, with a basic theory for the possibility of “coordination without hierarchy” – we are now in a position to think about the possibility for networked organization to function as a kind of self-governance. It is important to note, that the concept of networks can be used to describe a range or modes of coordination and organization. Hardt and Negri (2004, 56-57) outline three distinct types of networks (in a military context): the hub network, the polycentric network and the distributed network:

The traditional military structure can be described as a hub...network in which all lines of communication and command radiate from a central point along fixed lines. The guerrilla structure suggests a polycentric network, with numerous, relatively autonomous centered clusters, like solar systems, in which each hub commands its peripheral nodes and communicates with other hubs. The final model in the series is the distributed, or full-matrix, network in which there is no center and all nodes can communicate directly with all others” (Hardt and Negri, 56-57).

Thus, it is not simply that all networks are desirable from a democratic or anti-authoritarian perspective.<sup>38</sup> Rather, it is this last network model, the “distributed network,” that overlaps with the above discussion of non-hierarchical coordination and that I use for theorizing a networked form of self-governance. However, even distributed networks are not *necessarily* democratic. However, much like direct action, they have the potential, when mobilized in certain ways, to be *radically* democratic. Or, as Hardt and Negri (2004, 93) put it: “We have to look not only at the form but also the content of what they do. The fact that a movement is organized as network or swarm does not guarantee that it is...democratic.” One can think about direct action as the “content” and network as “the form” of many contemporary social movements. In the previous chapter, I outlined criteria to help distinguish democratic from non- (or anti-) democratic action. Hardt and Negri (*ibid.*, 54-55) focus on two core features of a distributed network.

One essential characteristic of the distributed network form is that it has no center. Its power cannot be understood accurately as flowing from a central source or even as polycentric, but rather as distributed variably, unevenly, and indefinitely. The other essential characteristic of the distributed network form is that the network constantly undermines the stable boundaries between inside and outside. This is not to say that a network is always present everywhere; it means rather than its presence and absence tend to be indeterminate...Networks are in this sense essentially elusive, ephemeral, perpetually in flight. Networks can thus at one moment appear to universal and at another vanish into thin air.

In contrast to the hierarchical model of organization – characteristic of both the hub and, to a lesser extent, the polycentric network, a distributed network: 1) has many nodes but no center and most, if not all, of those nodes can communicate with each other; and 2) has unstable boundaries such that its “members” – who is, and who is not a part of the network – are always

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<sup>38</sup> The Foucauldian conception of power as something that circulates, for example, could be well be seen as kind of network that is to be resisted by democrats and anti-authoritarians. Indeed, Hardt and Negri (2004, xii), working in a Foucauldian framework, raise concerns that “‘network power,’ a new form of sovereignty, is now emerging, and it includes as its primary elements, or nodes, the dominant nation-states along with supranational institutions, major capitalist corporations, and other powers.” Thus, even though the sovereignty of the nation-state and the classic model of imperialism have fallen somewhat by the wayside, this is being replaced by a newer and more diffuse network that they identify as “empire.”

shifting. “[A] distributed network such as the Internet is a good initial image or model...because, first, the various nodes remains different but are all connected in the Web, and, second, the external boundaries of the network are open such that new nodes and new relationships can always be added” (*ibid.* xv).

That said, even these networks should not be considered perfectly non-hierarchical or egalitarian. Research into a diverse array of networks – from the internet, to citation patterns to food webs in ecosystems – has shown that networks are built around their own internal hierarchies, in which some parts are more important than others.

[I]n most real networks the majority of nodes have only a *few* links and...these numerous tiny nodes coexist with a few big hubs, nodes with an anomalously high number of links. The few links connecting the smaller nodes to each other are not sufficient to ensure that the network is fully connected. This function is secured by the relatively rare hubs that keep real networks from falling apart...We see a continuous hierarchy of nodes, spanning from the rare hubs to the numerous tiny nodes (Barabasi 2003, 70).

Thus, while networks are decentralized and encompass many different nodes, not all of those nodes are as important, influential or powerful as others. For example, on the internet, websites that already have many existing links attract newcomers to link to them, as well. “Nodes that have been around for awhile...have distinct advantages over newcomers” (Dean 2009, 30).

Therefore, it is important not to idealize networks as being perfectly egalitarian or spontaneous. Networks have both hierarchies and histories, and both of these (at least potentially) reflect unequal distributions of power. Just as internet networks have hierarchies, networks of organizations and activists have less important nodes and more important hubs. The hubs are those individuals or groups that have better connections and greater influence. Agents could hold those privileged positions simply because they are older and more established, or because they have greater access to resources, or because they have done the hard work of establishing



relationships with many others. Whatever the reason, an important point is simply that such privileged positions exist in networks.

This does not mean that networks should be scrapped as a potential mode of coordination and self-governance. Though they too suffer from problems of hierarchy, the contention underlying support for networked organization is that the level of hierarchy present in networks is frequently much less severe, and much more flexible, than in centralized models of organization. Critically, in a distributed network no single node or hub dominates the network insofar as no single node can issue commands that others must follow. Moreover, communication is possible between many (though perhaps not all) nodes in the network, enabling multiple nodes to be sources of innovation and action. Beyond that, networks have proven to be successful at coordinating social movements and mobilizations, even as mainstream observers have struggled to understand how these movements work – grasping for a way to describe the so-called “leaderless” nature of these movements, groping to make sense of a model of coordination that looks so different from the hierarchical models that dominate our politics and economics. For instance, in describing the successful shutdown of the WTO in Seattle in 1999, activist and author Starhawk (2002, 404) speculates: “My suspicion is that our model of organization and decision making was so foreign to their [the police and city officials’] picture of what constitutes leadership that they literally could not see what was going on in front of them.” It is this model of action and decision-making that merits further development and consideration within democratic theory. In the following section, I illustrate how social movement networks can function as a form of decentralized coordination on both global and local scales.

## V. Social Movement Networks in Practice: Two Geographic Scales

### *Networks and Global Democracy*

Social movement networks have been primarily theorized in relation to democracy on a transnational and global scale. Keck and Sikkink's (1998) influential *Activists Beyond Borders*, for example, highlights the transnational networks of activists that have organized and operated across national borders. The focus on both historical advocacy networks, such as those of the anti-slavery and women's suffrage movements, as well as more contemporary campaigns for human rights and environmental protection. While their work usefully challenges "realist" conceptions of international relations by arguing that non-state actors have important roles in shaping world politics, they see social movements – to return to a distinction made in the introduction – primarily as reformers of existing institutions rather than innovators of democracy itself. They see them primarily as bringing international leverage to bear on national or international institutions.

In contrast, other theorists that highlight transnational activist networks as innovating democratic practice itself are more useful for my project. Hardt and Negri (2004) contend that the dispersed network is one of the mechanisms by which "the multitude" – the global, social multiplicity – can rule itself. In other words, they see networks as making a radically different form of global democracy possible.

[D]emocracy is confronted today by a leap of scale, from the nation-state to the entire globe...And, it is simply not possible to 'scale-up' democracy, while thinking of it in the same way. [D]emocracy must be conceived and practiced differently in this new framework and this new scale (Hardt and Negri, 236).

They propose that the challenge of global democracy is not to "scale-up" the existing institutions that characterize existing nation-states, since even at their existing scale they seem to be failing to achieve, or even approach, the democratic ideal. Networks are meant as an alternative

conception of global democracy, and as a counter-point to the institutional views of someone like Held. Held (1992, 340) presents a “cosmopolitan model of democracy” with several key features: 1) the creation of regional parliaments; 2) international general referenda on matters of transnational importance; 3) the democratization of international governmental and regulatory bodies; 4) the entrenchment of political, social and economic rights; and 5) the formation of a truly democratic assembly of all democratic states and societies. As laudable as such a vision is, it very much falls prey to the logic of viewing the challenge of global democracy as one of “scaling-up” traditional democratic institutions. Hardt and Negri see networks and “the multitude” as an alternative to global representative institutions and a global *demos*. How, then is a network structure supposed to function as a form of organization and coordination on a global scale?

To take one example, there is a compelling case to be made that a network form of organization was responsible for facilitating what is likely “the largest protest event in human history” (Walgrave and Rucht 2010, xiii). On February 15, 2003 millions of people around the world participated in coordinated protests against the impending U.S.-led war on Iraq. Estimates of the global turn-out vary, with the BBC estimating between six to ten million participants from up to 60 countries, though various other sources put the number of participants at between ten and thirty million (BBC 2003). Protests occurred on every continent: there were major protests throughout eastern and western Europe; in all three North American countries, across South America, throughout Asia, with major protests in several Middle Eastern countries, in South Africa, Australia, and even Antarctica. Regardless of the specific number, the fact that many millions of people participated in coordinated, but decentralized protests throughout the world suggests that networked organization can be a quite powerful force.

The coordination of millions of people from some 60 countries to voluntarily participate in protests was accomplished without a single centralized authority issuing a command or controlling the course of events. Rather, a call for an international “day of action” was issued, originally by an anti-capitalist group in the U.K. That call was transmitted through activist networks and taken up by others, including the United for Peace and Justice Coalition in the U.S., the Cairo Anti-War Conference in Egypt, the European Social Forum in Italy, and the World Social Forum in Brazil. Independent groups, associated with these networks, then issued their own calls for a “day of action”. As Maeckelbergh (2009, 84) argues: “Although coalitions and networks are set up which bring many groups together, *there is no singular overarching organizing committee.*” And, indeed, organizers in different locations accepted (and often transformed) the original call to action and autonomously created specific events in their city or country, which brought hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands or even millions of people into the street. The cumulative result of these efforts was the massive February 15 demonstrations. That the so-called “coalition of the willing” launched the Iraq War anyway may call into question the tactics employed by the anti-war movement – in particular, I think it stresses the limitations of utilizing “protest” rather than “direct action” – but it does not belittle the sheer coordinating power of decentralized networks.

In this case, a network effectively organizes and coordinates highly dispersed and differentiated actors. Recall that, according to Chisholm (1989, 29) coordination involves four elements: 1) a plan of action must be developed; 2) the plan of action must be communicated to the parties who will carry it out; 3) the plan as developed and communicated must be accepted by those parties; and 4) relevant information must be acquired and disseminated. The *plan* of action is transformed by networks into a *call* for action. It is a call, rather than a plan because the

caller possesses no authority to command that others follow, and because the “plan” itself can be changed and adapted as autonomous organizers see fit. Thus, the networked model of initiating action is to issue “a call.” The call is an initial plan (element 1) and a major element of its success is determined by whether it is successfully communicated to other nodes (element 2), and whether other nodes find it to be a plan they either accept as is, or embrace in a modified form of their own choosing (element 3). The challenge of disseminating information (element 4) is reduced due to the network structure itself, as explained in previous section.

More fundamentally, these protests were coordinated without a centralized authority, without a consensus among all the constituent parts, without even a singular, unifying decision ever being made. This suggests that in a network decisions are not made, they *emerge*. There are important overlaps here between networks and theories of complex systems and their core concept of “emergence”. As Johnson (2001, 19) explains: A complex adaptive system involves...

... multiple agents dynamically interacting in multiple ways, following local rules...But it wouldn't truly be considered *emergent* until those local interactions resulted in some kind of discernible macrobehavior...a higher-level pattern arising out of parallel complex interactions between local agents.

No formal body claiming to represent all the different protestors agreed that people. around the world would protest that day. No collective decision, in that sense, was made about the decision to protest or what shape the protest should take. Rather, a proposal – a call for action – was put forward that other citizens could take up or not and shape as they saw fit, according to “local rules,” i.e. local norms, politics, and conditions. Organizers in different locations accepted that call to action and created specific events in their city or country, each of which was different. Instead of a single unifying decision, there were many independent decisions about how exactly to protest. This enabled different groups to adopt different approaches to the protest, while also

allowing the cumulative effect to result in a cohesive global protest. The protests were “emergent” because the “parallel complex interactions” facilitated by the network structure produced a clear “macrobehavior”: the largest protest in world history. In this way, networked forms of organization make decentralized coordination possible at a truly global scale.

A similar dynamic existed for the occupation movements of 2011, wherein occupations in each city were able to craft their own strategies and tactics, messages and initiatives, while all feeding into a larger movement (or producing a “discernible macrobehavior”). Precisely because of this, occupiers were able to collaborate with each other, without requiring conformity or consensus, and without mandating compliance with any single occupation’s decisions. In the next section, though, rather than thinking about the networked relationship *between* different occupations, I challenge the tendency to adopt non-networked relationships *within* individual occupations. I suggest that networks are not only applicable on a large scale as a way of enabling a kind of global democracy, but also on a much smaller scale, as an alternative to the traditional model of direct democracy: the general assembly.

### *Networks and Local Democracy*

Though networked organization has frequently characterized the coordination of protests and occupations across cities and countries, the mode of organization within each individual occupation has made significantly less use of networked modes of organization. The occupations in cities across the U.S. and Spain during 2011 employed the model of the directly democratic general assembly – operating on a model of consensus decision-making – as the mode of organization internal to the occupation. For example, a short film about the decision-making process in Liberty Plaza during the Occupy Wall Street movement equates “consensus” with “direct democracy” (Meerkat Media Collective 2011). So while networks are the mode of

organization over large distances for the contemporary social movements, direct democracy is the *sin qua non* of decision-making when actors share a common space. Such a tendency is not only evident in the recent occupation movements, but more broadly as well. National Indigenous Congress, associated with the well-known and influential Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico, for example, has made a similar type of distinction. They have suggested the following maxim: “Act in assembly when together, act in network when apart” (Notes from Nowhere 2003, 64). There is, no doubt, much that is desirable about a directly democratic assembly in which people deliberate and decide. My argument is *not* that there is no role for assemblies. A radical democratic politics will always, and should always, include people sitting down together and talking. I argue that it is possible to apply the logic of networks not only to organizations across large geographic spaces, but even to the relatively small and shared space of the individual occupation. Networks can function as a desirable supplement to assemblies and as a desirable alternative to the model of a single, general assembly. Thus, I position “network democracy” as an alternative to “direct democracy.”

From both direct participation and observation, I think that one of the lessons that came out of the Occupy and *Indignados* movements was about the limits of the general assembly, the traditional model of direct democracy. I focus on two key problems that emerged: size and consensus. First, the general assembly quickly became insufficiently democratic because they became too large for most people to truly be participants in them. This was a realization that came, perhaps surprisingly, as a result of the movement’s very success and broad appeal: many people wanted to be part of it. Once the assembly gets big enough, it becomes a quite cumbersome process and, more importantly, doesn’t actually enable meaningful participation in power. Representation becomes inevitable. Consider Barber’s (1984, 307) proposal for “strong

democracy,” built on a national system of neighborhood assemblies consisting of between one and five thousand citizens each. Plotke (1997, 25) engages in a thought-experiment of carrying out Barber’s proposal for neighborhood assemblies in order to show how quickly, and inevitably, direct democracy becomes representative democracy.

Two problems immediately arise, probably with enough force to stop the project as direct democracy. One is the problem of attendance. In the deliberative stage, consider that most people prefer to attend. But circumstances make a number of people unable to do so: illness, work schedules, responsibility for children. Others are ambivalent – students who prefer to study, artists who want to complete their day’s work in the evening, and so forth. In direct democracy, everyone needs to attend. Could this be done without coercion for a sequence of meetings?

The second problem arises if time scarcity were somehow managed and sufficient resources were expended to allow everyone to attend. At this meeting of (say) one thousand people, who gets to talk first? And last? Imagine an open floor at one of the first meetings, when an agenda for deliberation is shaped. Presume a long evening meeting of 2.5 hours. Interventions average three minutes, including applause and pauses between speakers. Fifty speakers get the floor. (The meeting has conversational elements, so there are forty separate speakers and ten people speak twice.)

Are the other 960 members of the assembly participants or highly interested spectators at a political event? If “direct” means more than being physically present, in what sense would this 96% of the assembly be engaged in strong or direct democracy? Barber’s critique of representation would surely apply to the relation between the 4% of the room with a voice and the 96% with eyes and ears only (*ibid.* 25-26)

I witnessed this process occur in the admittedly less formal assemblies of Occupy Denver, and I am certainly not alone in this sentiment. “By the fourth or fifth day of the occupation in Barcelona [as part of the *Indignados* movement], it became apparent in practice what we [and Plotke] had already argued in theory: that direct democracy recreates representative democracy” (Crimethinc 2011). Direct democracy, given even moderate participation in a city-wide general assembly, becomes representative democracy anew. There is quickly a division between participants and observers, and between specialists and spectators.



Second, and perhaps more importantly, the traditional model of direct democracy – the general assembly – is but another manifestation of forcing consensus and unitary decisions on plural people. As we have already seen, “the moment of decision” – whether it is reached by majoritarian, proportion, or modified- consensus procedures (the latter being the procedure utilized by most generally assemblies during the 2011 occupations) – cannot help but smother difference and plurality by requiring that a single decision be reached. If the occupations have indeed provided a testing ground for alternative models of democracy, then it is worth considering whether the model of democracy employed in the occupations themselves reproduces the same dynamics that have rendered state-based democracy so thoroughly undemocratic. In essence, the general assembly shares with the state-centric model of democracy a drive toward reaching singular decisions and enforcing uniformity on an inherently heterogeneous people. Though the city-wide general assembly brings people (those that participate anyway) closer to the exercise of sovereign power than the state does, it nonetheless is still premised upon sovereignty and unanimity. While “unanimous direct democracy...is a genuine solution to the problem of autonomy and authority” (Wolff 1970, 27) it is, as I and others have already shown, an impossible and oppressive ideal in a pluralistic world. As such, radical democracy should not be equated with the traditional ideal of direct democracy: the one big meeting in which all the people deliberate and decide. My contention is that direct democracy – insofar as it is equated with a single general assembly – falls well short of the democratic ideal. *Direct democracy is not democratic enough!* Consider the perspective of anti-authoritarian elements within the Barcelona occupation of the *Indignados* movement.

It inevitably recreates the specialists, centralization, and exclusion we associate with existing democracies. Within four days...the experiment in direct democracy was already rife with false and manipulated consensus, silenced minorities,

increasing abstention from voting, and domination by specialists and internal politicians (Crimethinc 2011).

In essence, direct democracy replicates the core features of statist democracy: the aim is to legitimize the centralization of power and the corresponding imposition of unity. Rather than acting as wellspring for collective action, it was a legitimization-machine that suppressed creativity and diversity.

The central assembly did not give birth to one single initiative. What it did, rather, was to grant legitimacy to initiatives worked out in the commissions; but this process must not be portrayed in positive terms. This granting of legitimacy was in fact a robbing of the legitimacy of all the decisions made in the multiple spaces throughout the plaza not incorporated into an official commission. Multiple times, self-appointed representatives of this or that commission tried to suppress spontaneous initiatives that did not bear their stamp of legitimacy. At other times, commissions, moderators, and internal politicians specifically contravened decisions made in the central assembly, when doing so would favor further centralization...

...Again and again in the plaza, we saw a correlation between [direct democracy] and the paranoia of control: the need for all decisions and initiatives to pass through a central point, the need to make the chaotic activity of a multitudinous occupation legible from a single vantage point—the control room, as it were. This is a statist impulse. The need to impose legibility on a social situation—and social situations are always chaotic—is shared by the democracy activist, who wishes to impose a brilliant new organizational structure; the tax collector, who needs all economic activity to be visible so it can be reappropriated; and the policeman, who desires a panopticon in order to control and punish.

The dichotomy between representative and direct democracy is not, therefore, analogous to the dichotomy between centralization and decentralization – both forms of democracy are centralizing. If there is to be a decentralized form of democracy, it is through networks.

Networks are not relevant simply because they make coordination possible on a large scale as others have argued, though that is surely still important. They are important because they foster decentralized organization and, in doing so, disperse power. “It is a question of mode, not scale” (Crimethinc 2011). The goal is neither to “scale-up” direct democracy to the global level, or

“scale-down” direct democracy to the neighborhood level. Rather, the objective is to foster an alternative model of organization at all levels.

But what does network democracy look like in the smaller and more local context of an occupation, rather than the (oddly more familiar) context of transnational movements or the global “day of action”? Theorizing network democracy in the context of an occupation means rejecting the goal of having one central assembly in which all can participate. This is not a rejection of assemblies, as such, but the general assembly, in particular. We, instead, would have many different assemblies working on more specific issues, many different groups engaging in a variety of projects. The core insight here is that not everyone has to get together, deliberate and decide on every issue in order for democracy to be in place. I again take inspiration from anti-authoritarians in Barcelona.

Like all states, [direct] democracy is based on the centralization and monopolization of decisionmaking...Imagine [instead] a *Placa de Catalunya* with diverse assemblies, where everyone could launch initiatives without going through a centralized and stagnant meeting, thus letting everyone experience participation in self-management rather than remain spectators. We can organize millions of initiatives, more fluidly, without having to go through committees easily dominated by ‘specialists.’ We don’t need others to dictate what we can do. We are not satisfied with only one voice as the centralized assembly, because it’s hardly better than the daily silence of capitalism. We want a *placa* full of voices, of assemblies, of conversations. We’re truly interested in the weaving of connections between everyone, but we’d like to do so in a different way: through solidarity of struggles and not the homogenization of ideas (CrimethInc. 2011).

In this vision, the direct actions of individuals and groups – the ability to “launch initiatives without going through a centralized” body that authorizes those actions – can contribute to the enactment of a collective project, without requiring consensus, agreement, or even a decision among all of its constituent parts. This is a model of “emergence” in action.

I like to think about this process of coordination through the analogy of the *flocking* behavior of birds in the flight or the *swarming* behavior of insects. Both of these flying masses

demonstrate a high degree of coordination in the absence of any centralized direction. Rather than being directed by a single bird or a single insect, they operate through observance of basic “local rules”: don’t run into or crowd your neighbor, but follow the average direction of those around you. The flock or the swarm operates through basic feedback, responding to the movement of birds around them – moving this way, moving that way, based on the actions of others. A network democracy in the context of an occupation operates in this same way. If one group is handling something – collecting and/or preparing food for the group, cleaning up trash, mediating disputes, planning marches, and so on – you can focus efforts elsewhere. If the group that is handling one of those tasks is doing a terrible job at it, then nothing prevents you from organizing your own efforts to do it better: if Group B, always has better food than Group A, or if Group 2 always organizes better marches, than Group 1, the decentralized patterns of attraction and repulsion will lead the group in a particular direction without the group ever having to come together *as a whole* and decide which direction to take.

In this way, I want to connect the practices of direct action and networks. If the core civic activity of “direct democracy” is attending and (perhaps) participating in a general assembly, the core civic activity of “network democracy” is participating (if one wants to) in direct action. The self-authorized direct actions of many decentralized and non-sovereign actors contribute to the enactment of a collective project. Rather than making a single decision about the direction of the collectivity, the constituent parts of that collectively shape their shared direction through their initiatives and projects. In short, in networks *decisions emerge through the direct actions*. In place of the traditional conception of direct democracy, a network democracy enables both multiplicity and decentralization, on the one hand, and effective

coordination and collective action, on the other. I take this to constitute a radical alternative to both representative and direct democracy. Plotke (1997, 27) argues:

‘Direct’ democracy is not precluded by the scale of modern politics, but because of core feature of democracy as such. This is true because democratic premises include sufficient autonomy for individuals to develop and sustain different preferences, including different preferences for political involvement, and because democratic forms include a commitment to reaching decisions.

In critiquing the viability of direct democracy, Plotke means to argue that, as he puts it, “representation is democracy.” If the alternatives are between “representative” and “direct” democracy, then Plotke is right: democracy cannot help but be representative. Whereas Plotke sees this as evidence that all is well with representative democracy, I am inclined to side with the anti-authoritarians in Barcelona who argue instead that this confirms that both representative and direct democracy are, essentially, authoritarian. However, combining the practices of direct action with networks enables a conception of democracy that is neither representative nor direct (in the traditional sense).

[The] rejection of representation...does not lead movement actors to the unrealistic conclusion that everyone must be involved in all decisions. Instead, the movement is in the process of creating a democratic system that would potentially allow for people to be as involved as they desire at all levels of decision-making (Maeckelbergh 2009, 225).

Through direct action and networked organization people can participate directly in politics when and how they want (or not at all), focusing on whatever issues, projects, or initiatives motivate them.

## **VI. Networks: Self-Governance in the Context of Difference**

In the first half of the chapter, I laid out two quite distinct literatures: a framework for self-governance and a debate within democratic theory about various ways of accommodating

difference. I then proceeded to introduce the idea of decentralized coordination through networks, and to offer an example of social movement networks on both global and local scales. In this concluding section, I tie these various themes together by focusing on the question: How, and to what extent, do networks enable self-governance in the context of difference?

Recall that self-governance refers to “the capacity to get things done without the legal competence to command that they be done” (Lipschutz 1999, 102, citing Ernst-Otto Czempiel). As I have argued, the complementary practices of direct action and networked organization enable precisely this to occur. Both the *call* for a “day of action,” such as the February 15, 2003 anti-war demonstrations and the *call* to Occupy Wall Street resulted in massive (and, in the latter case, sustained) mobilizations, even though no individual or group could compel others to join. The self-governance that networks enable, then depends on leadership, but anarchic leadership: leading by example and leading without compelling. As Graeber (2009, 211) puts it:

Most anarchists...do not see themselves as a vanguard whose historical role is to ‘organize’ other communities, but rather as one community setting an example others can imitate. The approach – it’s often referred to ‘contaminationism’ – is premised on the assumption that the experience of freedom is infectious, that anyone who takes part in a direct action is likely to be permanently transformed by the experience, and want more.

Democratic direct action is a form of leading – a way of encouraging action and building the capacity to “get things done” – that succeeds only to the extent that others find the action (or the call for action) compelling. Networks enable those direct actions to have ripple effects or reverberations by spreading information, experiences, tactics, messages, and so on rapidly throughout the various nodes in the network. There is real democratic value in this process of reverberation or “contaminationism.” The actions or models that spread – over both time and space – are those that resonate with and inspire others. Consider the way that Tahrir Square or the original Occupy in New York City acts as examples that others can use to spur action and

adapt to their own circumstances. Actions or models spread only when – and only to the extent – that people are drawn to them. In a sense, this is a networked way of gauging popularity: people “vote” for actions or “elect” models by replicating and reproducing them. But rather than voting or electing someone else to exercise power on one’s behalf, the “voting” or “election” that occurs through direct action involves the mobilization of one’s own power.

We can also think about the possibilities of networked forms of self-governance using a quite different example: open-source software such as the Mozilla Firefox web browser or the Linux operating system.

Traditional, proprietary software makes it impossible for users to see the source code that shows how a program works... The open-source movement takes the opposite approach. When the source code is open so that anyone can see it, more of its bugs are fixed, and better programs are produced: the more eyes that see it and the more people allowed to contribute to it, the better a program it becomes (Hardt and Negri 2004, 339).

The collaborative development of computer software, as well as collectively built websites like Wikipedia and Reddit, speak to the creative and constructive capacities of networked self-governance.

However, it would be too much to argue that networks can straight-forwardly solve the sorts of self-governance challenges that Ostrom has identified. I am not claiming that networked organization provides a self-governance solution to, for example, our global commons like the atmosphere or the oceans – though I must point out that neither state nor market governance is working here either. I do want to argue, though, that there is some evidence that networks enable actors to solve the three central problems that Ostrom (1990, 42-45) identifies for any system of self-governance: 1) supplying new institutions (or basic rules), 2) establishing credible commitments, and 3) mutual monitoring. In thinking about the example of open source software and user-built websites, we see individuals and groups supplying the “institutions” (software and

website) and using “mutual monitoring” in order to establish “credible commitments” (reviewing each other’s updates and changes, blocking users who violate the rules, and so on). If self-governance means to the “capacity to get things done” even when no one can compel others to do so, then, I think networks offer an organizational structure that makes that possible in larger and more complex contexts than Ostrom’s case studies suggest.

Beyond just enabling self-governance, though, networks enable people to do things differently, while still acting together. For this reason, networks are ideal for fostering self-governance in the context of difference.

The significance of [the alterglobalization] movement’s focus on diversity is not that it understands ‘the people’ to be diverse and complex, although it does, but that it allows this diversity in ‘the people’ to be translated into a diversity of outcomes...Creating plural outcomes is part of decentralizing power” (Maeckelbergh 2009, 172).

Whereas “reasonable pluralism” eliminates many differences at the outset, and “communicative action” eliminates difference as the outcome, networks enable a plural people to produce plural outcomes, without abandoning the idea that they can act in common. Whereas Mouffe sees the “moment of decision” as a closure (and she is basically right about this), the closure is less closed, if you will, when the decision enables multiplicity, rather than requiring uniformity.

[T]he anti-summit mobilizations [that characterized the alter-globalization movement] are organized simultaneously by different groups who organize in parallel to each other but only partially with each other. This means that the various strands of political beliefs can function side by side without all of them having to come together or agree on a common methodological approach (Maeckelbergh 2009, 84).

Hardt and Negri (2004, 217) note a similar dynamic at the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle:

What most surprised and puzzled observers was that groups previously thought to be in opposition to each other – trade unionists and environmentalists, church groups and anarchists, and so forth – acted together without any central unifying structure that subordinates or sets aside their differences.



There are, of course, much sharper differences or larger gulfs between groups existing in the world today, and I do not claim that networks will magically allow cooperation between them. What I do want to emphasize, though, is that networks enable cooperation between groups that do not just have trivial differences. Labor unions and environmentalists have real and significant disagreements, as do anarchists and church groups. The potential of networks is to enable cooperation and coordination without having to set these differences aside, because agreement and consensus is not needed (and, further, would be coercive). And, it is not just that groups can set aside differences in their worldviews – or their “comprehensive doctrines” as Rawls would say – in order to focus on shared tactical or strategic objectives, though surely this is also important.

Networks also enable groups to disagree on the basic substance of what they do and still function together. Maeckelbergh gives the example of action planning for the 2003 anti-G8 mobilization in Lausanne, Switzerland. Not only did the various groups who wanted to participate disagree on a range of religious, moral, and philosophical questions, they also disagreed about how to protest the G8 itself. Rather than developing a single protest strategy or a single repertoire of tactics, the network decided to enable plural outcomes in order to allow different groups to act differently. Their main objective was “...to ensure that all these different groups could do what they were planning to do. This meant ensuring that the actions of one group did not interfere with the actions of any other group” (Maeckelbergh 2009, 131). They implemented this through a principle of “diversity of tactics” and a practice of discrete “blocs.” First, the pink and silver blocs would engage in mobile blockades – essentially marches, with a relatively low risk of arrest, which would enable the participation of large numbers of people – through the “no-protest” zone. The aqua bloc, a pacifist bloc, would engage in a fixed and non-

violent blockade. The black bloc would engage in mobile actions aimed at confronting the police and damaging state and corporate property. Finally, several additional groups would engage in blockades at key points of access to the port. Though they would all act in quite different ways – differences that speak to both philosophical and tactical diversity – they were able to help each other achieve a common goal: disrupting the G8 meeting. Moreover, each group would amplify the disruptive power of the others by spreading state resources thin and confusing police responses to groups acting in widely divergent ways. This is the meaning of coordination without consensus, and action without agreement.<sup>39</sup>

This is, of course, is not to say that there are never unbridgeable differences or unresolvable conflicts. Rather, network democracy does not see these as a necessarily problematic, but as a potentially useful source of parceling and decentralization.

Due to the network structure, this type of division does not necessarily mean a permanent fissure that disassociates, that cuts the ties and connections between actors and groups, but can mean a realignment of unities and the creation of more and more nodes and clusters and the further decentralization and diversity of the movement. In this way, even unresolvable or unresolved conflict, is resolved. What counts as resolved, however, changes in that it no longer means everyone is united in one singular form, but that people are still linked to each through the rhizomatic network structure” (Maeckelberg 2009, 107).

The conflicts, much like the “Indian” logic of violence discussed in Chapter II, have a centrifugal function of spreading and dispersing power. As I discuss in the conclusion, networks are a contemporary manifestation of the logic of centrifugal power and point us toward a democracy that works to disperse power, rather than legitimate its centralization.

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<sup>39</sup> I think it is possible to characterize the action plan for the anti-G8 protests as an agreement, but – and this is the important point – it is an agreement that does not require unanimity. Maeckelbergh (2009, 100) even argues that consensus and conflict – need not be at odds with each other. “Consensus...should be conflictive...Insistence on conflict was an attempt to create a consensus process that allowed for diversity, a consensus that did not insist on unanimity.” Insofar as consensus enables a group to decide to allow difference her point is fair one, but it seems to stretch the meaning of “consensus” beyond recognition, at least the way the term is used within democratic theory.

Network democracy is meant as a stark contrast to the way we usually think about democracy. In a typical model of democracy, a polity comes together – either directly or through representatives – to address some issue. The end result of that process is *a* (singular) decision. Agreement must be reached, whether by plurality, majority or consensus. This model of democracy remains fundamentally the same whether employed at the local level (such as a town hall meeting), at the national level (as in Congress) or at the global level (as in the United Nations). The networked model of organization is distinct: it is a vision of democracy in which people can collaborate with each other, *without requiring*:

- 1) *Clearly defined boundaries* around the ‘polity,’ since people within a specific geographic location might not be included in a network, while those outside a geographic location may be included. As Maeckelbergh (2009, 188-89) puts it: “A decentralized network has no start, no end and certainly no geographical boundaries fixed over time...Consequently, ‘the people’ in a decentralized democratic praxis are constituted by the links they make with each other...”
- 2) *Elections*, since “the people” is in no way fixed and their boundaries are always unclear and constantly shifting. Thus, there is no way to allow everyone to vote. Indeed, the very concept of elections with universal suffrage becomes unintelligible in this context.
- 3) *A centralized decision-making body*, since all a single actor can do is issue proposals or lead by example, but cannot require that (or how) other actors engage with these.
- 4) *A single, unifying and binding decision*, since each actor in the network is able to choose if (or how) to participate, and the final outcomes that the network produces is the result of the numerous and diverse decisions of the actors in the network.

The theory of network democracy elaborated in this chapter pushes at the boundaries of what we think of as constituting democracy. However, it is precisely by upsetting these most basic assumptions that radical democracy remains possible today.

## CONCLUSION

### DEMOCRACY AS THE DISPERSION OF POWER

#### I. From Legitimation to Dispersion

Some of the central questions of political theory center on the issue of legitimacy. What gives some the right to rule over others? What authorizes the use of political power and coercion? Why is the state – whether it takes the form of monarchy, or oligarchy, or aristocracy, or democracy – legitimate? Though the anti-authoritarian account of democracy I have presented in the preceding chapters is not a statist account of democracy, it nonetheless involves the mobilization of political power. Indeed, this was precisely the point: democracy means situations in which people have power and, thus, practices like direct action ought to be considered as having radically democratic potential. However, in making the argument that direct action has democratic potential, I naturally invite questions about legitimacy. The disruptive power of direct action interrupts or halts existing institutional processes: blocking roads, attacking property, stopping commerce. The prefigurative power of direct action addresses perceived problems, constructs new relationships, and/or builds new institutions, without going through formal processes of official authorization. In both instances, the mobilization of political power has consequences – often coercive consequences – for other members of society. As such, direct action raises problems of legitimacy: if direct action is fundamentally a form of political power, then what legitimates this exercise of power? Hardt and Negri (2004, 79-80) pose the question this way:

It is possible today to imagine a new process of legitimation that does not rely on the sovereignty of the people [since neither the practice of direct action, nor their concept of “the multitude” makes claims to sovereignty]...Is there an immanent mechanism that does not appeal to any transcendent authority that is capable of legitimating the use of force in the multitude’s struggle to create a new society based on democracy, equality, and freedom?

I do not think Hardt and Negri ever quite get around to answering this most challenging question. In Chapter III, I aimed to provide some criteria for assessing the democratic legitimacy of direct actions – criteria that I take to be “immanent” to the democratic ideal itself. For example, direct actions are democratic when a) they upset power inequalities and make real the political equality on which democracy depends, and b) open up or create spaces for others to exercise political freedom. To the extent that direct actions do both, I see them as a legitimate mobilization of power or force. However, I do not pretend that such tentative criteria resolve the myriad legitimacy issues that the practice of direct action generates.

The legitimacy questions are all the more challenging because direct actions always involve only some small part of the *demos*. They are, in Wolin’s (2008, 277) words, the “initiatives of a fraction, not a collective whole.” Even in the most renowned cases of popular democratic movements, only a fraction of “the people” was represented. During the American Revolution, no more than 50 percent of Americans actively supported the revolution and some 15 to 20 percent were actively opposed (Calhoun 2004, 235). Similarly, Poland’s Solidarity Movement against Soviet rule mobilized, at most, a quarter of the population (Canovan 2005, 136). And, in most cases, the participation rates in direct actions are significantly lower. This, of course, raises a problem: If direct action always involves only a *fraction* of “the people,” does this practice then not fly in the face of the notion that *all* of “the people” should rule? If democracy means, at its core, “rule by the people” or “a situation in which people have power,” and if direct action only enables *some* people to have power, then is it really a radically democratic practice?

The basic thrust of the answer – and, I suspect, a major reason why Hardt and Negri do not directly respond the question they pose – is that an anti-authoritarian account of democracy

rejects political theory's focus on legitimation. The basic goal of democratic theory from this perspective is not to *legitimate* the *centralization* of power, but instead to *enable* its *dispersion*. The fundamental question for this type of democratic theory is not "How can power be legitimated?" but instead, "How can power be dispersed?" This question involves a shift in focus. Rather than studying or promoting practices or procedures that legitimate sovereign power, we should theorize and cultivate practices and procedures that disperse non-sovereign power.

## II. "Dispersing Power" in the Dissertation

If there is a common theme to the proceeding chapters, it regards the merits of – and the mechanisms for – dispersing power. Why should we want multiple nodes of decision-making and action – multiple sites of power – and, further, how might these non-sovereign units coexist and interact in ways that enhance democracy?

In Chapter I, "Reclaiming Libertarianism," I argued that it is impossible to understand freedom as mere self-sovereignty, but rather than freedom must be understood in relation to other actors. In particular, that freedom is possible when relationships of domination – that is, when others possess the power to arbitrarily interfere in one's life – are minimized. This implies, I think, a deep relationship between political freedom and political equality. As Walzer (1983, xiii) argues in one of my favorite passages:

The aim of political egalitarianism is a society free from domination. This is the lively hope named by the word *equality*: no more bowing and scraping, fawning and toadying; no more fearful trembling; no more high-and-mightiness; no more masters, no more slaves. It is not a hope for the elimination of differences; we don't all have to be the same or have the same amounts of things. Men and women are one another's equals...when no one possesses or controls the means of domination.

If freedom means to not be subject to relationships of domination – and what could freedom mean if not, at least, freedom from domination? – and domination implies that no one has too much power over us, then political freedom and political equality are not, fundamentally, at odds with each other. Indeed, political equality – the dispersion of power throughout society – makes possible political freedom. In this way, I aimed to provide a defense of democracy grounded on freedom as non-domination, arguing that we adopt of view of democracy as the dispersion of power.

In Chapter II, “The Indian Against Leviathan,” I argue against the Hobbesian view that we must centralize power in the state in order to avoid abuses of power by others. While liberal and republican thinkers generally eschew Hobbes, I contended that they (often implicitly) endorse Hobbes’s centripetal logic of power. But this logic is quite obviously deeply problematic: in authorizing or assuming a sovereign state we create a beast that possesses far greater capacities for violence, coercion, and abuses of power than any other entity in society. Moreover, from the perspective of freedom as non-domination, we have created an entity that we should have every reason to believe can dominate us. But this is not the only option: there is an alternative to state sovereignty. I then drew on insights from anarchist anthropology to show that, and how, non-state peoples have adopted a divergent logic of power. The mobilization of a centrifugal logic of power spreads and disperses power, rather than concentrating or centralizing it. Both in their international politics and their external relations, “Indian” societies adopt this alternative logic of power. The questions, then, become not centered on the possibility but rather on *applicability* – What form(s) might centrifugal power take in the contemporary world? – and *desirability* – Can centrifugal power be mobilized in ways that are democratic and non-dominating?



This is the conceptual relationship between Part I of the dissertation, “Anti-Authoritarian Perspectives on Freedom and Power” and Part II of the dissertation, “Interventions in Democratic Theory.” On the one hand, the theories of domination and non-domination, as well as centripetal and centrifugal power, developed in the first half of the dissertation, are meant to ground (i.e. provide justification for) the social movement practices of direct action and networked organization developed in the second half of the dissertation. On the other hand, the practices of direct action and networked organization are meant to provide mechanisms for the realization of non-domination and centrifugal power.

In Chapter III, “The Democratic Potential of Direct Action” I presented direct action as a political practice that enacts or mobilizes power. In this way, it is distinct from many other forms of political activity, including many instances of demonstrating and protesting, because its primary objective is not to communicate. While this makes direct action a potentially dangerous practice, it is also precisely this feature that makes it potentially more democratic. The challenge, at least from the perspective of freedom as non-domination and centrifugal power, is to mobilize direct action in ways that disperse, rather than centralize power. I contended that direct action is democratically desirable when it has a centrifugal logic, and democratically undesirable when it has a centripetal logic. Direct action can function according to a centrifugal logic by challenging and seeking to break apart centers of power and by opening up spaces for others to exercise political power. Direct action is democratic in these ways because it enables, in a very concrete fashion, political equality: it moves toward the ideal that people have enough power to manage their own life, but not so much that they can manage the lives of others. I concluded that chapter with a set of criteria or guidelines for amplifying direct action’s centrifugal tendencies.

In Chapter IV, “Network Democracy,” I argued for a networked form of organization as a further mechanism for dispersing power. Networks enable people to collaborate and engage in collective action (essential for radical democracy), without creating a centralized, sovereign power or requiring unanimity (both of which are anathema to an anti-authoritarian perspective). Habermas (1996, 372) argues that...

...democratic movements emerging from civil society must give up holistic aspirations to a self-organizing society...In no way [do civil society movements] occupy *the position* of a macrosubject supposed to bring society as a whole under control and simultaneously act for it (Habermas 1996, 372).

In a sense, I agree with Habermas: no one group can “occupy *the position* of a macrosubject” that can legitimately govern all of society. But, he misses the bigger picture. First, his objection applies to the state as much as it does social movements – both of which can represent “the people” only partially, given our fundamental plurality. Second, Habermas fails to think outside of the boundaries of sovereignty by assuming that there is, or ought to be, *one* entity that acts for all of society. He is wrong to assume that “democratic movements emerging from civil society” want to “bring society as a whole under control and simultaneously act for it.” Indeed, while social movement actors do want to act in ways that mobilize power, some of them, quite self-consciously, want to act for themselves, but not for others, and certainly not for everyone. The network structure of social movements provides the mechanism for making this possible: they enable coordinated action, allowing people to amplify each other’s power, without anyone dictating how others must act. In this way, networks achieve some harmony between the democratic ability to act together and the anti-authoritarian rejection of centralization, unity, and sovereignty. Social movement networks can be a way to mobilize power while simultaneously dispersing it. In short, distributed social movement networks can exemplify centrifugal power in action.

The impetus to disperse power is the common thread between the chapters, and also the common thread between the quite distinct theoretical traditions mobilized in the dissertation. We heard from anthropologists and economists, anarchists and libertarians, defenders of the market and anti-capitalist critics, radical democrats and those who are skeptical of democracy. I think it noteworthy that one basic point of agreement between these diverse theorists is their skepticism of concentrated power and their consequent commitment (mobilized in various ways and for different reasons) to dispersing power. I believe this basic dichotomy – between centralization and decentralization, concentration and dispersion, sovereignty and non-sovereignty – is constitutive of a broad anti-authoritarian perspective. Further, this perspective upsets traditional political oppositions, for example, between the “left” and “right,” between socialism and capitalism, between state and market. As the economist James Boyce (2002, 126) puts it:

The degree to which a society deserves to be called ‘democratic’ or the opposite, ‘oligarchic,’ does not hinge on whether it accords a bigger role in economic affairs to the market or the state. Both states and markets function democratically when power and wealth are widely diffused; both function oligarchically when power and wealth are concentrated in few hands.

On the anti-authoritarian perspective, democracy does not name any particular institutions or any particular processes, but rather names an imperative: disperse power. From this angle, democracy entails opposition to the centralization of power in all its manifestations. We can thus reimagine the political spectrum, with “democracy conceived as *the* radical position, as radicalism itself” (Lummis 1996, 10). In this way, the preceding chapters and the diverse theoretical traditions they employ all point toward a particular conception of democracy: *democracy as the dispersion of power.*

### III. The Merits of “Democracy as the Dispersion of Power”

What, then, is desirable about democracy as the dispersion of power? What is democratically advantageous about dispersing power and enabling many non-sovereign nodes of power?

First, it *fosters people’s agency and enhances their political power*. The dispersion of power entails a decentralization of action, meaning that people will often engage in politics at fairly local levels. The active participation of people – a key element of any robust definition of democracy – tends to bear more fruit in local contexts. As Wolin (2008, 291) argues, democracy “is most likely to be nurtured in local, small-scale settings, where both the negative consequences of political powerlessness and the possibilities of political involvement seem most evident.” By shifting political action away from the state and into diffuse, local contexts, people are likely to have greater political power *vis-à-vis* the existing forms of concentrated power. However, as I hoped to show in Chapter IV, this is not simply a call for a return to the old ideal of local, direct democracy. Such a move would be both impossible (we live in an interconnected and interdependent world, with ubiquitous boundary crossings) and undesirable (collaboration and coordination across localities is often necessary to resist the imperatives of centralized power and to construct alternative possibilities). In contrast, a network democracy fosters coordination and cooperation across a range of geographic spaces. Through processes of reverberation and “contamination,” people’s relatively small-scale direct actions can have significant cumulative effects.

Second, a democracy premised on the dispersion of power *enables pluralism and diversity to coexist with cooperation and collective action*. If a primary challenge for a contemporary theory of radical democracy is to enable self-governance in the context of

difference, networks are an ideal organizational form to accomplish these objectives. I spent a great deal of time on this point in the previous chapter, so I will not dwell on it here.

Third, democracy as the dispersion of power *minimizes relationships of domination*, and more broadly, *limits the negative effects of badly-used power*. Domination depends on concentrated power and, thus, efforts to disperse power make dominating relationships harder to sustain. That said, this is not a utopian vision. In the context of dispersed power, there will still be people who want to use their power for malevolent purposes, whether that means dominating other people or engaging in other nefarious practices. The difference is that concentrated centers of power can be very effectively put to work toward disastrous ends. This was Thoreau's insight at the beginning of his essay "Resistance to Civil Government."

The objections which have been brought against a standing army...may also at last be brought against a standing government...Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively few individuals using the standing government as their tool: for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure (Thoreau 1993, 1).

Thus, in the terms of Thoreau's example, a standing army would constitute a concentrated power, while citizen's militias would constitute a dispersed power. Certainly the individual citizens' militias could carry out atrocities, but not at the same scale or with the same efficiency that the standing army could. Chiefly, if people's participation is voluntary rather than compelled, it would at least be harder to mobilize people in service of such ends. As we saw, many "Indian" societies were perfectly peaceful and, indeed, some are quite warlike. However, in separating war from the state, destructive wars became much less common. Dispersing power does not eliminate war, or violence, or other "bads," but it does change the dynamic. Whereas a state or other centralized power can simply compel behavior, dispersed power cannot. In the latter context, many different people, many different nodes, many different

centers of power must agree with a course of action and take it up, in order to make it real.

While any individual node of power may itself engage in undesirable practices, the dispersal of these nodes of power reduces the likelihood that such practices will spread. That said, the obvious corollary to this is that dispersing power makes it more difficult to achieve “good” or desirable ends, as well. The question, I suppose, is whether this trade-off is worth it.

#### **IV. The Meaning of Radically Democratic Revolution**

The view of radical democracy – democracy as the dispersion of power – I have advanced in this dissertation is, at minimum, in tension with the state. This tension is manifested at both a conceptual and empirical level. At a conceptual level, since democracy means a situation in which people have power, the presence of a state – a separate organ of political power and one that, in addition, possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence – threatens the power of the people. Moreover, I have argued that the view of freedom as non-domination, which I take to be at the core of an anti-authoritarian perspective on democracy – is clearly threatened by the state. While the state is by no means the only entity in society that possesses the power to arbitrarily interfere in people’s lives, it is surely one such entity. On an empirical level, the state routinely eradicates experiments in radical democracy. This was the story of Occupy and the *Indignados*. As Arendt showed in *On Revolution* it was also the story of the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. Anytime radical democratic experiments emerge they constitute “a small power structure of [their] own” and are “clearly a danger for ...centralized state power” (Arendt 1963, 237). For Arendt, it is the notion of state sovereignty itself that stands opposed to experiments in radical democracy.

The spectacular success of the party system and the no less spectacular failure of the council system [Arendt’s preferred model of radical democracy] were both due to the rise of the nation-state, which elevated the one and crushed the other, whereby the leftist and revolutionary parties have shown themselves to be no less

hostile to the council system than the conservative or reactionary right” (*ibid.* 239).

For these reasons, I am inclined to suggest that the relationship between radical democracy and the state is not just one of tension, but rather one of opposition. They are irreconcilable social forms: “the multitude” rather than “the people,” “non-sovereign nodes” rather than the “sovereign body,” “centrifugal power” rather than “centripetal power.” I say this knowing full well that the radical democracy I have outlined – built on the practices of direct action and networked organization – is not a “complete” political proposal. It is not my intention, nor do I claim, to have presented a model of social organization that resolves all, or even most, of our basic political questions. Rather my aim has been to restore and reaffirm democracy’s radical nature, to position it as a revolutionary project, and to elaborate some of its core commitments (e.g. non-domination, non-sovereignty, self-governance, and diversity) and practices (direct action and networked organization).

Independent of the questions of the feasibility or desirability of a revolution premised on these commitments and practices, I want to conclude by posing the question: What would radically democratic revolution even mean? To be sure:

Twentieth century history is full of births of worlds that embody ‘old’ social relations...[I]n general, revolutions have not given birth to new worlds, though revolutionaries have tried to build them with the state apparatus...Despite the unimpeachable goodwill of so many revolutionaries, the fact remains that the state is not the appropriate tool for creating emancipatory social relations” (Zibechi 2010, 4).

What would it mean to do things differently and truly along radically democratic lines? If radical democracy means the dispersion of power, then a radically democratic revolution must not only mobilize power against the state, but also check the very power it generates. The challenge of such a revolution is to *build* power, but not *take* power.

My hunch is that cultivating practices of direct action and networked organization have the potential to balance these two objectives. On the one hand, direct action mobilizes collective power and networks can function to amplify that power. On the other hand, *democratic* direct action undercuts power inequalities and opens up spaces for others to exercise political power. Additionally, networked organization "...is based on the continuing plurality of its elements...in such a way that reduction to a centralized and unified command structure is impossible" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 82-83). In these ways, direct action and networks have the capacity to build power without taking power. Indeed, a peculiarity about the power that is generated by social movements is that it has a self-limiting quality. As Arendt (1963, 166) puts it, "power comes into being only if and when men (*sic*) join themselves together for the purpose of action and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another." To its credit, this form of power can only be sustained so long as it is generated and propelled forward by collective action. Beyond that, I would argue that radical democrats have responsibility to cultivate limitations on the very power they develop. This means a self-conscious effort to leave room for other people, and other nodes of power. Consider this point from an internal debate about the direction of the "Dissent! Network" in the U.K:

Whatever Dissent! is, it is not THE network of resistance, we shouldn't be trying to involve everyone possible, or we monopolise everything. I don't see Dissent! as some kind of revolutionary council. We should get back to what we already are, a network" (quoted in Maeckelbergh 2009, 112).

The argument here is that while Dissent! is rightly mobilizing collective power against state and capital, it also must put limits on itself. It should not attempt to be the sole network. The goal is *not* to have everyone join their group or to have their organization involved in every struggle. This would be tantamount to an effort to create a single locus of power against state and capital, and if they were successful, the origins of a new state.



Thus, the paradoxical situation for the theory and practice of radical democracy is how to generate power against domination, without recreating new forms of domination. A major aim of this dissertation is to provide some insights from anti-authoritarian theorists and social movements that speak to this possibility. Nonetheless, a radically democratic revolution faces two seemingly insurmountable challenges *simultaneously*: it must overthrow the most powerful states that have ever existed, and prevent the rise of new states from developing internally. This is not advantageous terrain from which to fight, but these are the terms of the struggle for radical democracy.

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